

Article

Educational Poverty and Deprivation: Attitudes and the Role of Teachers during the Pandemic

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Abstract: Educational poverty is widespread in compulsory education in terms of poor learning and socio-cultural disadvantages; it affects students with disabilities, students with learning difficulties, and those with an immigrant background. During the pandemic crisis, students with special educational needs (SENs) mostly suffered the risk of an additional deprivation. Within an advanced inclusive model during school closure, the Italian State guaranteed access to schools only to students with disabilities. What effects did this “equalizing” measure produce? What kinds of attitudes have teachers adopted and what roles have they played (active vs. passive) in order to make it sustainable? What was their acknowledgement of the educational poverty and deprivation? To what extent were their attitudes differentiated? This article explores the roles and attitudes of teachers during periods of lockdown as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic in Italy. We assume that the teachers’ attitudes were differentiated on the basis of five cultural dimensions (auto/hetero-referencing; vision of remote teaching; relationship with bureaucracy, relationships with students; teaching as performance or relation), and two functions (classroom teachers/ SENs teachers). The study is based on 42 semi-structured interviews conducted with teachers, principals, and parents in six lower secondary public schools with high rates of SENs students and multi-ethnicity (Northern Italy), and focused on the organisational, teaching, and relational aspects. Results seem to confirm that not all teachers agreed with the Ministry line and adopted a range of responses to the challenge of maintaining inclusivity, from the inert/impatient to the creative/active ones. Their attitudes changed during the post-pandemic period from atomistic to more collaborative, and their preoccupation with the fragile “uncertified students” increased. The article closes with recommendations on teacher training.

Keywords: educational deprivation; Italy; lower secondary education; vulnerable students; autonomy/heteronomy in teaching



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1. Introduction

This essay addresses the issue of educational poverty and its intersection with the difficulties facing students with special educational needs (SENs) during the 2020 school lockdown, with a focus on Italian teachers’ responses to their needs during and after the emergency period. Italy has a very inclusive legislation regarding school participation for students with SENs [1], given also that the State guaranteed access to schools for these students even during periods when schools were closed for lockdown. This article will explore the effects of this measure on a sample of lower secondary public schools with high rates of SENs students and multi-ethnicity (in Northern Italy), in order to try and understand how teachers addressed the educational poverty in practice, and the risk of an additional deprivation.

After presenting an overview of the normative framework adopted in Italy during the pandemic and a description of who is included among the financially poorest and the most disadvantaged (educationally speaking) students, we will test the hypothesis that the teachers’ attitudes towards their inclusion were differentiated on the basis of their role (i.e.,

classroom vs. SENs teachers) and five cultural dimensions. Empirical evidence gathered from the analysis of 42 semi-structured interviews conducted in six public lower secondary schools with a non-probabilistic sample of school managers, teachers, and parents will be discussed.

2. The Normative Framework of Italian Education during the Pandemic

During the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic (March–June 2020), Italy was the only European country where all schools, universities, and early childhood education services were completely shut down for 4 months, with distance teaching being introduced for the first time across several types of e-platforms. With the Decree-Law n. 6 (23 February 2020), the Minister of Education issued the first guidelines for distance teaching (called DAD, the acronym for *didattica a distanza*), recommending teachers adapt methods and contents to the digital environment, work on maintaining relationships and fostering motivation among all students

After the initial collective trauma [2], the Ministerial Decree no. 39 issued on 26 June 2020 identified SENs and school inclusion as educational priorities for the following school year of 2020/21, with a focus on disadvantaged students. This urgent measure included an additional EUR 85 million to finance the purchase of individual digital tools for less well-off students, in compliance with the criteria of digital accessibility for people with disabilities [3].

In order to support school staff, the Ministry of Education launched the webpage Online inclusion (*Inclusione via web*), a dedicated website offering tools targeted to SENs students and delivered the guidelines for Integrated Online Teaching (DDI = *didattica digitale integrata*), a blended teaching regime where physical classrooms and virtual classrooms are interconnected [4]. Each school was required to prepare a specific plan by adopting ordinary and extraordinary measures to ensure that SENs students were present at school (even if the rest of the classroom was connected remotely), creating customised face-to-face activities based on the number of students, type(s) of SENs, and the available professional resources.

Restrictions, limitations, and reconfigurations of ordinary school life during the pandemic emergency, including the separation of students and the differentiation of teaching modes, represented serious professional challenges for school staff. Despite this, a high level of compliance with the new management and teaching rules has been reported [5]. According to an explorative survey [6], school staff have mobilised every personal and professional resource available to prevent any decline in the inclusion of SENs students. In the present paper, we will endeavour to explore the attitudes and practices of the school staff during this difficult time, when they were trying to manage and minimise the risk of learning loss and deprivation of the poorest and most disadvantaged.

3. Educational Poverty in Italy, At-Risk Students, and Additional Deprivation Due to the Pandemic

Both social inequality and educational poverty are endemic issues for the Italian school system, given the enormous territorial disparity [7] and the weight of social origins in influencing school success or failure [8]. The reproduction of educational poverty from one generation to the next is attested by the high rate of early school leavers (11.5% of the population aged 18–24 in 2022), as well as the high percentage of underachievers among teenagers: the lower their economic and socio-cultural status index (the statistical tool introduced in OECD-PISA surveys to measure the student's status, and used also as a reference in the national assessment system for Italian students, INVALSI), the lower their score in reading, mathematics, and science [9].

The educationally poorest students seem, on the one hand, to be those who come from a disadvantaged background (poverty as a factor of underachieving), and on the other, those who cannot follow the standard learning and developmental trajectory (poverty as a result of being a student with special educational needs). The Ministerial Directive of 27 December

2012, Measures for pupils with special educational needs and local organizations for school inclusion, classifies three different types of students with special educational needs: (1) those with a diagnosed disability (or disabilities), (2) those with a specific learning difficulty, and (3) those with a socio-economic, linguistic, or cultural disadvantage. In all these cases, schools should put in place the necessary educational and teaching measures to foster the achievement of their educational goals. Decree no. 182 of 29 December 2020 provides guidelines for drafting the new National Individualised Education Plan (PEI), a compulsory tool that must be drafted after a wide consultation with the student's teachers, other educators, health services, and other stakeholders.

In this article, we distinguish between educational poverty and deprivation. Following the most accredited definition in the European Union [10,11], educational poverty is the limitation of educational outcomes, which compromises prospects and reduces the individual's potential for personal development and social participation and can be measured along two dimensions: attainment (i.e., the qualifications acquired) and achievement (i.e., proficiency levels). These outcomes then become available resources in the labour market and/or in accessing higher education, and whether an individual obtains them (or fails to) can have a major impact on their future and on the risks of social exclusion.

The definition of poverty as deprivation is mainly traceable to the work of the English sociologist Peter Townsend [12], who considered poverty as a lack of resources required to achieve the living conditions which are customarily commanded by the average individual or family, thus excluding them from a society's ordinary living patterns, customs, and activities. This is a "relative" view of poverty that requires investigations to focus predominantly on effective material and social living conditions, rather than on the available financial and monetary resources. In the educational field, poverty means focusing on educational outcomes (in both dimensions: achievement and attainment) while deprivation means looking at the learning conditions and environments, with their assets and shortages. To outline a definition, we can conceive educational deprivation as the lack or shortage of resources for the learning process and the educational pathway. To measure educational deprivation, we can consider the list of home possessions used in the ESCS index [13], as well as some of the items identified by the European Commission to define child social and material deprivation [14]; more widely, we could make reference to the level of economic, social, and cultural capital available in the household and community background that can affect the learning process and the learning environment negatively.

From this point of view, the pandemic has been a factor of deprivation for all students, but some students succeeded in counterbalancing this factor to varying degrees thanks to the conditions and resources present in the family environment. More specifically, in this article, we assume that the introduction of distance learning increased deprivation for all students because of the lack of ordinary social learning that took place in schools and face-to-face teaching. For those students who would have already been considered deprived before the pandemic, however, deprivation has likely resulted in growing educational poverty (potentially reinforced by the lack of support given by schools).

Educational deprivation, in terms of a lack or scarcity of resources available in both academic and non-academic contexts [15], showcases relevant gaps nationwide across different sectors of the population even before the pandemic (i.e., among low-income families, among those living in the South/Islands, and among those with an immigrant background). As the OECD suggests [16], these students must be taken into special consideration, given «the struggle they face to maintain their learning pace from home due to inadequate resources; the erosion of their basic academic skills due to lack of practice; the difficulty in re-engaging with education activities; their demotivation as they fall further behind; and the curbing of their educational aspirations».

From this ambivalent situation, on the one side, an inclusive model of public education, and on the other side, a structural inequality nationwide, stem the following research questions: when the Italian State guaranteed access to schools in-presence only to students with disabilities, what effects did this "equalizing" measure produce? What kinds of

attitudes have teachers adopted and what roles have they played (active vs. passive) in order to make it sustainable? What was their acknowledgement of the educational poverty and deprivation? To what extent were their attitudes differentiated?

4. Hypothesis and Method

Given the rise in poverty in Italy and the consequent economic decline that followed the pandemic, the work of teachers has become even more challenging than it had been before. Two structural impediments, one external and the other internal, hampered teachers' capacity to foster inclusiveness: the widespread challenges affecting young people [17] and the confusion and demotivation of teachers themselves due to their lack of digital skills at the onset of the pandemic [18]. The aim of our research was, therefore, to explore teachers' attitudes in the immediate post-pandemic regime.

Our hypothesis is that during the pandemic school years (2019/20, 2020/21, and 2021/22), teachers' attitudes were differentiated across five relevant cultural dimensions concerning their experience of teaching online (H1), selected among the main findings that emerged in the literature. As several studies highlight, the sudden transition from in-presence to distance teaching introduced both significant challenges and potential threats to the teachers' professional well-being [19,20]. Thus, we define these dimensions by using pairs of polarised concepts: First, self-referencing vs. heteronomous, in terms of professional orientation (more individualistic or self-made vs. collectivistic or open to others). Second, their vision of distance learning (seen as a "new world" to be explored vs. an "inconvenient hitch"). Third, their relationship with bureaucracy (more or less proactive vs. passive, positive vs. negative with respect to a top-down command). Fourth, their relationships with students during distance learning (trusting vs. distrusting their behaviour on screen). Finally, their professional identity (teaching as a "relational" vs. a "performative" job). These polarised concepts will be used in the analysis of the teachers' excerpts as extremes of a continuum where each teacher is positioned and will be useful for the interpretation of the teachers' behaviour in emergency situations (and for further training plans).

We also assume (H2) that their role (classroom teacher vs. SENs teacher) must have significantly differentiated teachers' attitudes due to the different challenges and responsibilities associated with their professional functions, especially in those contexts lacking adequate resources and material or organisational support [21]. Finally, despite the specific measures adopted in each classroom and school, we assume (H3) that the majority will still perceive an increase in educational deprivation and a decline in the weaker students' condition, as several studies point out [22,23].

The article will use data gathered from the "Educational deprivation and systemic responses" study, carried out by Università Cattolica on six lower secondary state schools with high rates of SENs students and students with an immigrant background in three areas of Northern Italy: two in Milano, two in Brescia, and two in Piacenza. A set of semi-structured interviews were conducted in 2022–23 with seven key informants from each school (42 interviews in total) chosen among teachers, school managers, and parents. To recruit the interviewees, each school appointed the most engaged teachers (chosen among both classroom and SENs teachers) and the parents who participated in the Parent Teacher Association. The interview focused on the organisational, teaching, and relational aspects of the schools' response to the needs of SENs students during and after the pandemic with the aim of creating a triangulation of views on the specific aspects of what the school did to improve inclusion and support resilient responses.

5. Data Analysis and Results

As other studies have pointed out [2–24], given the lack of clear ministerial directives, the response to the COVID-19 emergency in Italy, at the very first stage, was largely based on individual teachers' initiative and sense of responsibility, with heterogeneous results. Even in the six schools included in this study, available resources, in terms of digital devices

and administrative resources needed to launch online learning, had a decisive influence on schools' ability to react promptly and on teachers' attitudes towards the unprecedented experience of distance learning.

5.1. Self-Reference (Autonomy) vs. Heteronomy in Professional Attitudes

Autonomy and heteronomy are two fundamental orientations of the teaching profession in both ordinary and extraordinary settings. Italian teachers already appeared to be engaged in this dilemma before the pandemic broke [25]. The teachers interviewed confirm that the first lockdown (s.y. 2019/20) was very chaotic and stressful: in the absence of clear instructions and in the uncertainty regarding the future, some of the most motivated teachers, along with the school coordinators, acted spontaneously to reach out to students. They used informal channels (telephone calls, WhatsApp groups) and proposed the first online learning situations as a "rescue activity". But the interviewees refer also that some colleagues—given teachers had no formal obligation to teach remotely—only provided homework and reading/video material via email and were unavailable for long periods of time.

"There was an initial moment of confusion [. . .]. There were those who tried in every possible way to keep in touch with their students, by e-mail or in other ways, and those who, not being under any obligation, disappeared a little from the scene. Then, given things were left mostly to teachers' free initiative at the beginning, all those who were perhaps already lacking in certain aspects completely disappeared". (Curr_Teacher_4)

For the latter, distance learning was only an inconvenient hitch. On the contrary, those teachers who were autonomous before, acted with a spirit of self-innovation and collaborated with colleagues in small groups. In particular, the help offered by more experienced teachers in using ICT proved invaluable:

"We threw ourselves a little bit into. . . experimenting among ourselves, even just to see that everything worked before proposing it to the children [. . .] in this phase I prepared tutorials for my colleagues, which I then made available [. . .] in a second phase, I supported some colleagues in activating the videoconferences, sometimes even just to solve a really concrete and practical issue". (Curr_Teacher_30)

The actions of SENs teachers aimed at maintaining contact with SENs students and their families were largely autonomous, probably in accordance with their personalised support mandate.

By the following school year (2020/2021), all the surveyed schools were able to define common guidelines for online lessons, at least in terms of defining a timetable and what digital platform to use. This made it possible to involve teachers in the implementation of distance learning in a more uniform way. In addition, the schools offered numerous training courses on distance teaching methods and the majority of teachers followed them.

5.2. Vision of Distance Teaching

The teachers interviewed had different attitudes towards the radical novelty of moving from traditional to digital teaching. Some classroom teachers were immediately creative in adapting lessons to the tools available for distance learning and involving students with different strategies such as the use of applications, including ad hoc ones for students with SLDs (specific learning difficulties), or the use of several devices simultaneously, for group work and participatory techniques. It seems they could experiment with innovative teaching as never before.

"For those students who were struggling the most, especially in the afternoons, SEN colleagues in particular helped us form groups and we worked using cooperative learning, also doing mini-classrooms [online]. Students were connected in their classrooms to work and the teachers would go to each classroom from time to time to see how the work was going and then we would all be together for a shared moment" (Curr_Teacher_23)

In other classes, where teachers simply delivered traditional face-to-face lessons remotely, they encountered many difficulties, such as the lack of students' attention and concentration, lack of feedback, and a lack of adequate ICT skills.

"Since I would then be interacting, maybe I would then ask them to do it [the exercise]; that is, I would show them and then say "now who wants to try it? But [...] when I shared the screen, I could no longer look them in the eyes, see them in the face. So that was a limitation" (Curr_Teacher_39)

SENs teachers, as we could gather from their personal experiences, tended to be very ductile in their role and modes of participation in class activities, often supporting the main teacher and ensuring flexibility in individual tutoring. Creative experimentation also emerged in the use of ICT, as online learning was adapted to students with SENs and SLDs. SENs teachers felt the experience of distance learning to be particularly tiresome. Integrated digital teaching also turned out to be complex in many aspects, from the management of interactions and the integration between students (present at school) and those simultaneously connected from home. Some of those interviewed stressed that, depending on their particular condition, distance learning could also offer an enabling and not just an inhibiting environment for students with disabilities.

"These students, those with autism or with behavioural problems, in some ways they have actually benefited by this kind of work, because they were in the quiet of their home: nobody disturbed them, nobody fought with them. . . and so they were able to work, even though, in public opinion, not much work has been accomplished with distance learning" (SEN_Teacher_37)

The drastically negative judgement on distance learning thus seems to be accompanied, nonetheless, by a general effort among schools to foster the use of digital technologies, as confirmed by one school manager.

"Those who say that distance learning is useless, I would wring their necks like chickens [laughter]. . . because you know. . . it is not the tool that defines the effectiveness, but what is behind it... that is: do you have a relationship with the child? how significant is that relationship? how much do you, the teacher, care about the child? Because that's basically all that matters". (School Manager_22)

5.3. Attitudes towards the Emergency: Inventive Activation vs. Passive Resistance to Bureaucratic Command

During the first lockdown, in several schools included in our sample, only a small group of teachers reached out to students (and their families) to provide them with the educational material and technical support to attend online lessons. The immediate activation of SENs teachers was crucial in helping the weakest families redesign their home environment in order to make it a learning context suitable for distance learning.

"We attempted to track every student [...] and so we adopted a customized strategy [...] We contacted students even just to explain how to connect to the platform using a smartphone or with other devices, we introduced the whole procedure to log onto sites and platforms". (Curr_Teacher_4)

Most teachers, especially those who were older and less experienced in ICT use, made a great effort to learn how to use the methods and tools of distance learning, often overcoming reluctance and scepticism. In this attitude, we can see their inventive activation; some SENs teachers discovered digital technologies' potential to customise learning.

"The use of technologies is an advantage because it allows to work also on student's weak aspects. It opened up a whole new world to me, and now it's possible to get in touch with students more easily, to interest and motivate them, and render accessible something that previously was much less so" (SEN_Teacher_16)

Nevertheless, they also report the existence of a minority of colleagues who stayed inactive and passive for a long time, adopting opportunistic behaviour since no contractual

obligations formally required them to do more. Thus, a small group of teachers seemed to avoid the twofold challenge of maintaining the relationship with students and operating the digitalisation of teaching.

“Engaged teachers tried to reconnect with students and to adapt their teaching methods. Then, there were also those—10/15% of the teachers—for whom the pandemic was a sort of vacation, because they had always been reluctant to learn in the first place”.
(Curr_Teacher_4)

5.4. Relationships with Students during Distance Teaching: Confidence vs. Mistrust

The majority of curricular teachers do not seem to trust their students' behaviour during distance learning, since they report several episodes of misconduct, such as cheating on homework, either by copying or having parents complete it, disconnections or absences from lessons, justified by alleged internet connection problems and not being allowed to record online lessons.

“We lost those who clearly didn't want to take part and thus found excuses. Some thought online learning is just like a long holiday, I don't really need to do anything! But students who behaved this way when they were in seventh grade, paid that dearly in eighth grade”
(Curr_Teacher_11)

The interviewed argue that students who followed online lessons with low or no consistency and commitment back in the classroom showed the most severe shortcomings. Teachers themselves tend to justify this behaviour because of the following: (a) during distance learning, it was actually more difficult for students to stay focused and motivated; (b) they have suffered the lack of in-presence relationships with teachers and classmates, and of group work that could boost motivation and facilitate learning; (c) didactic methods were unusual for both teachers and students; and (d) connectivity problems were often actual. It is also emphasised the period of great stress and concern, due to the contagion risk, which negatively affected attention and motivation.

“In my opinion it's not easy, I can get in their shoes and it's not easy. . . Some students said: what is beautiful about going to school is staying with classmates! If I have to stay in my room at the computer, I lose myself”. (Curr_Teacher_17)

As they could not check the actual reasons for the reduced involvement of some students during distance learning, as well as the authenticity of their work, they decided to adapt assessment standards and methods. Some teachers deemed it incorrect to evaluate the preparation of students by means of ordinary tests, so they used interactive tools and rewarded participation and engagement more than proficiency. But this strategy raised criticism from parents: some of them complained about the teachers' disengagement with regards to learning assessment, emphasizing the negative effects on students' preparation, especially in the transition to high school.

“Assessment, we can say, was almost completely absent. This was a neglected aspect, and the situation lasted two years. . . I mean, middle school is a testing ground for high school. So you must understand nobody gives you anything if you only connect to online classes. So, oral tests, public speaking: all these things, we can say, were absent” (Parent_8)

Despite the incorrect and opportunistic behaviours among students, SENs teachers, as well as classroom teachers, tried by and large to be understanding of their behaviour, as this was the only sustainable agreement during distance learning, when reciprocal levels of credibility were severely threatened.

5.5. Teaching as a “Relational” vs. “Performative” Job

Teaching as a semi-profession mirrors different views of the ultimate purpose of schooling; among them, the choice could be between giving students cognitive skills or life competences [26]. At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the major concern of almost all teachers was to maintain a relationship with their students. They report that they had

acted immediately to ensure students (especially the weaker ones) a sort of “daily routine” made of contacts with classmates and emotional support, considering the delicate moment they were experiencing. So, both curricular teachers and SENs teachers overcame the boundaries and ordinary rules of privacy and availability, for example, giving students and their families their private telephone number and responding out of office hours. Some teachers dedicated part of their lessons to an exchange of experiences, with the aim of recreating a class climate by allowing students to voice concerns and maintain the connection with their classmates.

“The best thing was having created a class climate: when needed I immediately reached out to my students, we met and talked. So somehow, teaching went into the background, because by then learning had become a secondary objective. The major aim for me was to keep the kids company and to reassure them. Even through the screen you can breathe the anxiety, the fear for an obscure thing”. (Curr_Teacher_23)

In short, distance learning offered all teachers a very new opportunity to get closer to students and their families. Curricular teachers, who consider themselves to be more concerned about specifically academic aspects, highlight that maintaining the relationship was still fundamental to ensure the effectiveness of their professional profile.

“I think that, if we must consider a positive aspect. . . Someone asked why teachers are paid for their work in the classroom. A video lesson could be enough, don’t you agree? In my opinion the experience of distance learning has just showed us that teaching and learning at school cannot be replaced by a video lesson”. (Curr_Teacher_5)

Among those interviewed, SENs teachers reported more explicitly and firmly than others that they overshadowed learning goals for students with SENs and SLDs and considered building and maintaining relationships with students and their families, despite the physical distance, as the major aim of their work.

«There was nothing institutional and strict in the development of the relationship, we were very much free. We tried to maintain a personal relationship, taking care of the emotional aspects more than the acquisition of skills». (SEN_Teacher_2)

5.6. Measures for the Inclusion of SENs Students: The Application and Evaluation of Teachers

In the school year of 2020/21, the school professionals interviewed revealed different methods of implementation and assessment regarding the inclusive potential of the measure introduced by Ministerial Decree No. 39, 26th of June 2020, which allowed SENs pupils, especially those with some kind of diagnosed disability, to attend classes, while the rest of the class was required to connect online from home. The vagueness of this measure and in the subsequent ministerial guidance, which gave school managers broad space for interpretation, led to varying interpretations.

On the one hand, interviewees were unanimous in recognising some important benefits for SENs students and their families, and the result of this was the following: alleviation of the burden of care; direct contact with teachers, including SENs teachers, and some classmates; advantages of working individually or in small groups; and a high degree of personalisation of lessons. On the other hand, some teachers highlighted the potentially discriminatory aspects of the measure: risk of marginalisation when SENs students are separated from the rest of the class and the unfair treatment of students who wanted to participate but did not have access.

“Only children who had difficulties were allowed to come to school. I think that was a bad idea. Making them come to school, in actual fact, didn’t help; on the contrary, we really had to differentiate them [. . .] For them to be at school while their classmates were connected from home. . . it didn’t seem to me to be a functional method, neither for the children nor for the school. I mean, in my opinion it should have been either all at home or all at school”. (Curr_Teacher_5)

Only in one school out of the six surveyed was legislation implemented in a more inclusive manner by placing the group of SENs students with some other schoolmates in small groups, and alternating shifts (among non-SENs students) during the weeks of closure, in order to avoid isolation and separation among students.

“In the end, we got the others to come to school too, taking turns and always working in small groups. So we made a parallel timetable, with alternating days where, for example, on Mondays the first group came in with the SEN children and other classmates, who rotated, so as not to leave them alone [. . .] So in the end we used this ploy to get everyone to come to school with them”. (Curr_Teacher_12)

Despite the plurality of applications, the schools and teachers interviewed seem to converge around the concern regarding inclusiveness: both the critical judgements and the warnings about implementation seem to stem from the intention to ensure the full inclusion of all students and to avert the risk of discrimination.

6. Discussion: Teacher Perceptions of Educational Deprivation

The term “educational deprivation” was not known to all respondents. Some curricular teachers asked the interviewer about its meaning. Others state there was no increase in educational deprivation simply because *“we were able to reach everyone with distance learning”* (Curr_Teacher_17). However, the majority of teachers believe that the COVID-19 pandemic has markedly exacerbated issues that were already present before:

“Even sometimes in conversations, in brainstorming activities, or when teaching other subjects, we realize that these children. . . are very impoverished from many points of view”. (Curr_Teacher_30)

With reference to the COVID-19 pandemic, the interviews reveal four recurring factors that produced educational deprivation. Firstly, the health threat: children suffered trauma due to bereavement, the risk of losing loved ones, prolonged uncertainty, and the persistent, “hammering” requests of institutions demanding their compliance with health regulations and physical distancing that continued when schools reopened. Secondly, physical isolation and domestic segregation: extended quarantine periods reduced opportunities for face-to-face socialisation both in schools and in other formal contexts (i.e., sports and cultural associations) and informal social spaces (i.e., parks and other meeting places). Videogames and virtual interactions mediated by digital devices replaced free play in person. The massive use of these devices had become a daily routine in their lives, even as the emergency phase came to an end.

In this context, the challenges raised by distance learning are also relevant, as remote teaching has significantly limited the possibility of interaction with teachers and peers, the customisation of teaching, and the development of a personal study method. However, the fourth and decisive factor for many teachers is represented by the state of families and the role of parental support. With the pandemic, socio-economic difficulties and precariousness have increased, especially in families with non-Italian citizenship, where physical isolation has also amplified cultural isolation.

“Certainly, there has been impoverishment in the sense that many families have suffered from job loss, furloughs. These issues have impacted on students, and surely created cultural impoverishment because yes, we have remote learning, but it’s not like being at school, you know”. (Curr_Teacher_12)

In families with relational difficulties, domestic segregation has increased stress and conflicts.

“I had students whose parents were separating or separated when lockdown happened, not. . . not peaceful. They suffered a lot from having to go to one parent’s house, stay with the other, and then getting infected with COVID-19 from the parent they didn’t want to go to”. (SEN_Teacher_10)

Not all families, moreover, were equipped with the necessary technological devices, spaces, or digital skills to support their children in distance learning activities.

“Imagine [...] a child at home with parents who are unable to check if they are doing their homework correctly, if they’ve written correctly, if they’ve done it right. And this child was left a little on their own”. (SEN_Teacher_3)

Teachers also highlight some lenient and other overprotective attitudes from parents (*“There were trends, in my opinion already in progress before the pandemic [...] of families more frequently justifying their children’s lack of commitment in various ways”* Curr_Teacher_30). Such attitudes can cause deprivation given that children, if their actions are always justified, cannot overcome the challenge imposed by a “limit” and take consciousness of their responsibility regarding the academic process and its result.

According to the majority of teachers, the combined effect of these factors has led to an increase in educational deprivation at various levels. The main indicator of this is the increase in psychological distress, as witnessed by the growing demand for access to the school’s psychological counselling centre and the local child mental health services. Some disorders are explicitly linked to health-related traumas: the fear of losing a parent, the fear of death and illness, and obsessive sanitisation. Other disorders include emotional fragility expressed through crying spells or bursts of anger, generalised anxiety, and sleep disturbances. Some also highlight an increase in cases of depression and issues related to sexual identity. The rise in psychological distress is not solely linked to the pandemic but it is just in emergency that such disorders came to light and were exacerbated.

“Even in previous years, we had an increase in problematic situations, especially from girls. . . even in class, moments of panic attacks or reports of self-harm”. (Curr_Teacher_30)

Deprivation is also attested as a form of poor socialisation. After the emergency, some students seek more physical contact, ask to do things together, while others completely refuse to stay close to their classmates. The delay in the growth and maturation process seems to have particularly affected those students who spent the last year of primary school and the first year of secondary school in quarantine.

“Childish behaviour, especially in those who experienced lockdown when they were very young, they now arrive in first grade and act like little animals. I don’t really know how else to put it, they can’t sit still, can’t handle materials, can’t participate in the lesson, their peer relationships are complicated, they argue, they don’t know how to relate”. (Curr_Teacher_18)

During s.y. 2020/21, there was an increase in defiant attitudes and vandalism inside and outside school. In schools with a high concentration of immigrant students, teachers noticed a tendency towards closure within ethnic reference groups as an effect of long-standing social isolation [6]. Instances of pseudo-bullying increased the forms of aggression and arrogance, are also reported on social media. The difficulties mentioned above are mirrored in the learning processes. Teachers report an increase in difficulties concentrating, demotivation, anxiety about making mistakes, and a reduction in memory skills.

“The boys are very unfocused. These are characteristics that are generally present in classes but generally affect a small number of boys, we have never had such a strong incidence. . . I have noticed this thing that I think is connected to this fear, this constant fear that has spilled over into school”. (Curr_Teacher_23)

Moreover, there is a greater passivity noted in regard to participation.

“I don’t know, they wait for someone else to say it for them, they wait for someone else to think for them, they wait for someone else to do it for them. So, they don’t make the effort to try to remember”. (Curr_Teacher_5)

Some students have shown a strong resistance to returning to school after the pandemic. According to teachers, this overall decline in active participation has led to an increase in failures in lower secondary school in the s.y. 2021/22. Interruptions in schooling have occurred in the transition from lower to upper secondary school.

As an outcome of the increased deprivation, many of the interviewees reported reduced the attainment of the skills and abilities expected for the attended school grade.

“We noticed, as I mentioned before, a regression, a difficulty in concentrating even for short periods. . . and sometimes it seemed like in previous years they had hardly done anything”. (SEN_Teacher_10)

There is consensus among respondents that deprivation affected especially the most disadvantaged students; SENs teachers seem to be more familiar than curricular teachers with the concept of educational deprivation and focus in more detail on the specific challenges and conditions of SENs students.

Non-certified students with socio-economic fragility, mostly with an immigrant background, proved particularly complex to support. Contacting families, informing them about the procedures for distance learning, and providing technical assistance were particularly challenging due to linguistic and cultural barriers. Students with migratory backgrounds faced more difficulties in attending classes regularly, and in certain cases, they yielded fewer positive results. But deprivation also negatively impacted students with severe disabilities, who experienced a reduced effectiveness of compensatory tools. They showed psychological and learning disorders in addition to the previous condition, likely stemming from the difficulty in adapting to the new learning mode and suffered social isolation and loneliness.

“Concerning fragile and differently-abled students, this regression has been confirmed by psychologists. Through periodic meetings with specialists, we would say: Why is this happening? Instead of evolution, there has been involution”. (SEN_Teacher_3)

The impact of the lockdown on students with learning disorders (dyslexia, etc.), however, is assessed as less severe compared to their peers, and some teachers note that these students were still more supported by digital tools and regularly participated in classes, even during distance learning.

The sustainability of the “grey area” of vulnerable students is challenged by the pandemic regime, but not only did a school manager notify that this number is growing and has been on the rise even before the pandemic, but this trend has highlighted the challenge of students with learning difficulties and demanded institutions take note and address the issue.

“The increase has been almost constant since I’ve been in the school, even since I’ve been a teacher, I’ve seen an increase in various certifications, probably because families are more sensitive in many cases. In others, it might be a way to exert pressure, to, I would say, take responsibility away from students. Therefore, sometimes there’s perhaps too much leniency from those who certify”. (School Manager_29)

To sustainably address educational deprivation, it is crucial for teachers to strengthen the educational network within and outside of school and intensify their efforts towards vulnerable students who receive limited support from their family and social environment, and this effort must be made whatever the result.

“For a child who has a special educational need and has no one. . . I mean there is no family behind because of a socio-economic problem, [. . .] a teacher can make all the difference. They can at least try. Either some teacher takes them under their wing or else they are lost”. (Curr_Teacher_11)

7. Conclusions

This empirical study on teachers' attitudes allows us to understand that the term "educational deprivation" applies more strongly and widely than "educational poverty" to what happened in their classroom during the pandemic, especially with the vulnerable students. Although the latter (poverty) is better definable and measurable, and more familiar to the school professionals, deprivation refers to a wider range of criticalities, and thus, is useful for future plans of interventions and prevention.

The five cultural dimensions used for understanding the teachers' attitude lead to the conclusion that during the pandemic, only a small minority of teachers were led by heteronomy, saw distance learning as an inconvenient hitch, and were passive in front of the ministerial command. The vast majority of teachers made an enormous effort to appropriate the technology and overcome their previous resistance to information and communication technologies in teaching, often in a creative manner.

Despite our expectations, their efforts became more homogeneous than before. The usual division of tasks (and difference in job profile) between curricular teachers and SENs teachers was suspended by sharing the same preoccupation for the relational side of learning. The survey confirms there was a common orientation towards a positive understanding of students instead of evaluating their performances. In short, curricular teachers mostly changed their professional attitude, becoming consistent to the mandate of individualisation (typical of SENs teaching) and adapting teaching to the day-by-day conditions, rhythms, and experiences of each student. They also seem more sensitive to the consequences of such a "cultural change", as confirmed by the parents who demanded more attention be paid to the performative side of schooling.

The teachers' view of educational deprivation was very blurry before the emergency; during distance learning and in the post-traumatic period, many teachers (especially curricular teachers) realised that there were serious obstacles to learning and witnessed the occurrence of many disruptions on an individual basis for the first time.

As a result, through refining their sensitivity towards material and emotional deprivation, they recognise they have learnt as never before how to face educational fragility and turn their work practice in inclusive teaching.

For future plans, the findings suggest focusing on a joint training for teachers, without separation between curricular and support teachers, making the peer confrontation about the phenomenon of deprivation profitable, and the multiple causes and signals of it. A meaningful training should use a mix of remote learning and in-presence group reflections, so to help teachers to be reminded of their experience in the pandemic situation and draw lessons from it.

Moreover, the study showed that parents do often misunderstand the teacher's work, and even those who need help do not collaborate to reduce deprivation. Further studies must be carried out on the parents' perspective about the capacity of the school to deal with vulnerability and emergencies, along with projects to foster the school-family educational alliance against all types of poverty and deprivation related to children (as many projects do in the framework of the EU Programme Erasmus+ KA2 Cooperation Partnership).

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Data Availability Statement: Qualitative data were gathered from personal and anonymous interviews; data are not available to the general public due to privacy restrictions; the transcripts of the interviews can be opened to scientific research units (only for scientific purposes) after request to the corresponding author.

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