

COMMUNICATION AS A TRANSVERSAL COMPETENCE FOR THE SCHOOL-FAMILY ALLIANCE. AN INVESTIGATION WITH FOREIGN PARENTS

LA COMUNICAZIONE COME COMPETENZA TRASVERSALE PER L'ALLEANZA SCUOLA-FAMIGLIA. UN'INDAGINE CON I GENITORI STRANIERI

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Abstract

Among the 10 skills that require updating and training, the World Economic Forum (2020) placed communication in second place. An effective communication process between the different educational agencies has significant benefits for all the actors involved in the learning/teaching process: on students, parents, and teachers (García Bacete & Traver, 2010). From this perspective, communication becomes the fertile ground of encounter and the foundation of every community (Pati, 1984, p. 61). Acquiring or enhancing communication skills can be the key to sustaining the school-family educational relationship. As part of this study on the school-family relationship, an in-depth study has been developed on the relationship between school and non-indigenous families. This paper discusses the results of a survey that aimed to understand what type of communication parents of other nationalities than Italians carry out. Reflecting on how parents perceive their communication skills could open reflections and possible training actions to be undertaken.

Tra le 10 competenze che richiedono aggiornamento e formazione, il World Economic Forum (2020) ha inserito al secondo posto la comunicazione. Un processo comunicativo efficace tra le diverse agenzie educative comporta notevoli benefici per tutti gli attori coinvolti nel processo di apprendimento/insegnamento: sugli studenti, sui genitori e sugli insegnanti (García Bacete & Traver, 2010). In quest'ottica la comunicazione diventa il terreno fertile dell'incontro e il fondamento di ogni comunità (Pati, 1984, p. 61). Acquisire o potenziare le competenze comunicative può essere la chiave di volta per il sostentamento della relazione educativa scuola-famiglia. Nell'ambito del presente studio sulla relazione scuola-famiglia, si è sviluppato un approfondimento sulla relazione scuola-famiglie non autoctone. In questo paper si discutono i risultati di un'indagine che ha inteso comprendere che tipo di comunicazione attuano i genitori di altra nazionalità rispetto a quella italiana. Riflettere su come i genitori percepiscono le loro competenze comunicative potrebbe aprire riflessioni e possibili azioni formative da intraprendere.

Keywords: educational alliance; non-native parents; communicative competence; soft skills.

Parole chiave: alleanza educativa; genitori non autoctoni; competenza comunicativa; soft skills.

Introduction

It is known that transversal skills are becoming in recent years the center of academic reflection in different sectors. Conversely, soft skills are also the subject of discussion in sectors that deal with policy making and employability, confirming their innovative and significant scope not only in terms of the person's academic and academic training, but also in terms of professional, social, interpersonal skills acquisition.

In delineating what is meant by transversal skills, Cinque (2016) has developed an analysis of the different taxonomies and the related theoretical frameworks, outlining six categorization clusters most relevant in Europe: "1) Fundamental or basic skills: alphabetical, mathematical and digital; 2) Interpersonal skills: communication, teamwork, user orientation, ability to manage one's time; 3) Cognitive and metacognitive skills: ability to find and organize information, problem-solving, learning to learn, critical thinking, creative and innovative thinking; 4) Skills and personal

characteristics: responsibility, flexibility, resourcefulness, self-esteem; 5) Skills related to the world of work: orientation towards innovation and entrepreneurial spirit; 6) Community-related skills: civic sense and citizenship skills "(Chignoli *et al.*, 2020, 77).

All this suggests that alongside disciplinary knowledge it is necessary to implement training, professional and civic actions aimed at acquiring an active role in society and in the challenges posed by the world of work (EUA, 2018).

Although the awareness of the importance of transversal skills in this sense is very high, it is noted that at the academic level (but also at school) in terms of training, there is still a sort of reluctance on the part of trainers to "sacrifice" the contents disciplinary in favor of laboratories, internships (Cherubini *et al.*, 2018) and educational structures that, in addition to knowledge, focus on knowing how to do.

With this in mind, as Limone and colleagues (2017, 2) note, "the University must take responsibility for providing skills by aligning with the demand that comes from the world of work".

This statement is corroborated by the survey carried out by the World Economic Forum and condensed in the document: The Future of the Jobs Report (2020) according to which a thorough rethinking of work contexts is underway that requires the acquisition or strengthening of a complex set of skills. According to the report, in fact, by 2025 at least half of the workers in the world will have to model their skills to the changes affecting the market because of technological development. Added to this is the rapid transformative push imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic. In accordance with what has been stated, it is estimated that within 5 years the automation processes could cause the loss of 85 million jobs, which would, however, be counterbalanced by 97 million new jobs deriving from the rethinking of the relationship between machines and man.

"The report clearly highlights how the skills required by new professions or "to be revisited professions" are hybrid and belong to different fields, apparently distant, separated by clearly delineated boundaries when viewed from the perspective of the "disciplinary sectors" to which they refer and of the study paths on them prepared" (Frison, 2022, 276). This "hybrid" dimension of the emerging jobs mentioned above, involves the acquisition of skills that have at least three characteristics (Sigelman, Bittle, Markow, & Francis 2018): they usually lie outside the professional competence that requires them (1), multidisciplinary fields and domains combine and intertwine (2), we are oriented towards a set of highly specialized skills.

The report speaks of "skills gaps" to indicate the gap between the demand for the skills required by the world of work and the acquisition of the same that will grow over the next 5 years. "The top skills and skill groups which employers see as rising in prominence in the lead up to 2025 include groups such as critical thinking and analysis as well as problem-solving, and skills in self-management such as active learning, resilience, stress tolerance and flexibility" (WEF, 2020, 5). In addition to this, increasingly multicultural and complex work contexts are envisaged in which skills related to human interactions become increasingly relevant (WEF, 2020, 38). In fact, in the top 10 of the competences outlined, the communicative ones are positioned in second place. Moreover, communication is among the skills that require the most time for the acquisition of the same.

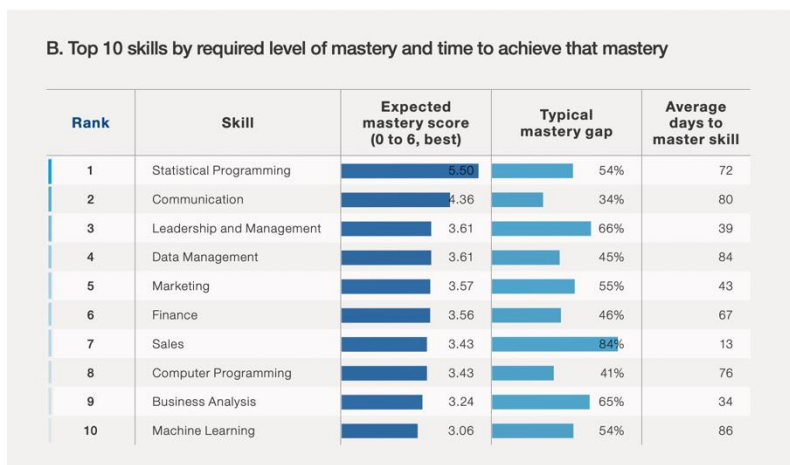


Image 1: “Top 10 skills by required mastery and training” (WEF, 2020, 38).

A clear list of skills expected for 2025 are listed in the top 15 below; however, it is also interesting to analyze which main skills or groups of skills employers see increasing or decreasing in view of 2025 (see Image 3).



Image 2: “Top 15 skills for 2025” (WEF, 2020, 36).

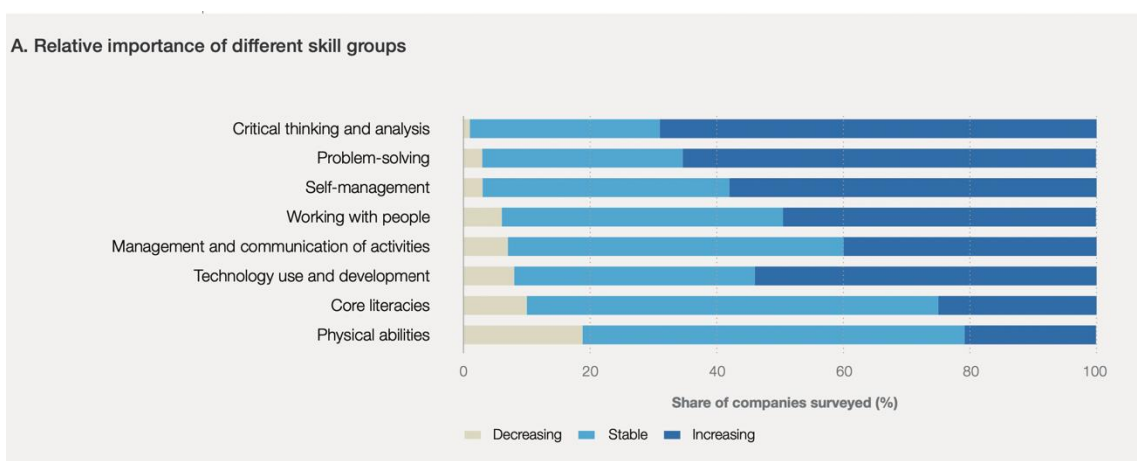


Image 3: “skill groups increasing and decreasing according to employers” (WEF, 2020, 36).

As can be seen, the world of work and society in general require personal and professional updating, so that talking about technical skills and disciplinary knowledge would be obsolete and unproductive; rather, it is necessary to turn to the acquisition of a broad spectrum of fluid and hybrid skills and start a reflection on the changes taking place to orient the educational-training action.

1. Communication at the basis of the school-family alliance

Communication is fully part of the key competences of the ongoing revolution that require updating and training.

Franco Cambi (200, p. 628) defined communication “an exchange between subjects regulated both by an intrinsic need and by a social and cultural necessity”. This definition contains the educational scope of communication between school and family as it encompasses specific individual needs and implicit and explicit social aspects.

In the preface of the text by Pier Cesare Rivoltella (1998) “Theory of communication”, Cesare Scurati states that educational communication has some qualities that characterize it. Among them:

- ability, whereby the asymmetrical condition between those who know and those who do not know turns towards a condition of symmetry for which emancipation is “the desired goal and the value at stake”.
- Coexistence, whereby the educational relationship is always the result of sincere, effective, and affective interaction, as well as dedicated to welcoming, helping and supporting each other.
- The systematic nature, whereby the different communication functions are interacting and connected to the person's experience.
- Non-intrusiveness, which focuses on intellectual loyalty, honesty and criticism and openness to differences or in other words, to freedom (Rivoltella, 1998, 7).

This list contains the potential of communication, which must be the fulcrum of the educator's "formative attention" as it is the basis of the evolutionary process of each person who "marks the ways and themes of communicating" (Rivoltella, 1998, 11).

From an ecosystem perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) it is possible to affirm that both the school and the home are educational contexts that are closely related to each other and involve enrichment for all the members who compose them. In other words, children and adults benefit from the community environments to which they belong (Martínez-González et al., 2005).

«Los adultos, profesorado, madres y padres, agentes sociales y comunitarios deben aprovechar este escenario educativo para construir redes sociales de apoyo mutuo, tanto para sí como para sus hijos de forma sistemática y organizada» (García Bacete & Traver, 2010, p. 3). Using these words formulated by the two Spanish scholars, it is important to underline that adults, teachers, parents, and the various social and community agents should take advantage of these premises to build social networks in a systematic and organized way, in which mutual support is fundamental. Pati (1984, 79) in this regard affirms that the educational bond "is always situated in the existential dimension of reciprocity".

Some authors have identified reasons that substantiate the choice to take care of communication between school and family, among all: (1) the huge number of hours that children spend at school, (2) the influence of education experienced in the family on the learning process, (3) the lack of clarity of the boundaries between school and home for a developing child, (4) collaboration improves the inclusion of schools in the territory (García Bacete & Traver, 2010, 5).

The development of good communication between the two agencies has significant benefits for all actors involved in the learning/teaching process. The table below summarizes the main effects of good communication on students, parents, and teachers.

Students	Parents	Teachers
Better grades; better scores in performance tests; greater access to post-secondary studies	Increased sense of self-efficacy	Parents recognize better interpersonal and teaching skills in teachers Greater commitment to teaching
Favorable attitudes towards homework	Greater understanding of school curricula	school leaders value their teaching performance more

More adaptive behavior; higher self-esteem	Enhancement of one's role in the education of their children	Greater satisfaction with one's profession
Performance of tasks, academic tenacity, and perseverance	Aumento della motivazione a continuare la propria formazione	Greater commitment to teaching
Participation in classroom activities	Better communication with your children in general and on tasks in particular	
Less schooling in special education programs	Development of positive parenting skills	
Lower rate of school dropout and absenteeism		

Table 1: Effects of good communication on students, parents, and teachers (Garcia Bacete & Traver, 2010, 6).

Although the listed benefits are intuitive, since the 1990s it has been evident that poor communication skills underlie, along with other elements, the difficult relationships between school and family (Fish, 1990).

Communication between school and family must include both two types: one-way and two-way. The first of an informative nature, if implemented daily, helps to build trust in the school by virtue of the transparency enacted. The second, by virtue of the bidirectionality, makes the parent active and protagonist of the educational process, thus increasing the collaboration between the two agencies (Macia, 2019, 149). On the other hand, Pati (1998, 50-51) does not hesitate to emphasize that communication in the educational field takes on at least four dimensions: first of all, the informative dimension mentioned above, aimed at making something known; the relational dimension, on the other hand, has to do with "being in relationship with someone"; the participatory dimension, then, is the dimension referable to the etymology of the word and therefore to "sharing"; finally, the exploratory dimension has to do with the historical-geographical and heuristic aspects.

Dimensions	Metaphor	Communication dynamics	Logic
Information	Exchange	Transmission/reception	Epistemic
Relation	Dialogue	Relationship/interaction	Affective
Exploration	Voyage	Desituation/resituation	Heuristics
Participation	Memory	Representation/recognition	Ritual

Table 2: The dimensions of communicating (Pati, 1998, 52).

It should be emphasized that effective communication depends in any case on the individual responsibility of each component of the system, which is spent on achieving a common goal (Fontalvo Sánchez & Ventura Jiménez, 2021, 66). All this can be assessed by the results and the resulting outcomes (Koontz, Weihrich & Cannice, 2012).

The success of this process is often based on the implicit or explicit agreement on the terminological and conceptual aspects that the two agencies pursue; This is so that a common understanding is established between the interlocutors and a clear and transparent context is created that leaves no room for fallacious interpretations (Quaranta, 2019).

Some authors have been involved in studying an effective communication system and in doing so, Bochaca (2015, 83), for example, has focused on the obstacles that do not make communication fluid and two-way. Among them he identified: the lack of interest or time on the part of the parents, the incomprehension on the part of the parents of what the school expects and vice versa the incomprehension of the teachers about what the family expects. Furthermore, in this scenario outlined by the author, it emerges strongly that within the school contexts there is the idea that families must approach the school, while it would be more profitable if the school became aware of its role to improve the relationship and communication with families, since the interest of families also depends on how much they perceive the school's desire to communicate.

Another interesting study identifies the following nodes as problematic, with respect to school-family communication (Guzón-Nestar & González-Alonso, 2019, 39): (1) the complexity of new family forms, (2) the difficulty in reconciling family and work, (3) the detachment maintained from school for prudence, (4) the discrediting of teachers, (5) the acceptance of differences, (6) the conception that one only goes to school when problems arise.

It could also be useful to analyze the reasons why a communication tends to fail; Franco-Cuartas (2001, 49-50) lists some of them:

1. "impossibility of full understanding".
2. Poor emotional skills.
3. Poor training skills.
4. Bad interpretation.
5. Judgmental attitude.
6. Defensive attitude.
7. Little transparency and sincerity.
8. Passivity or indifference.

If knowing how to listen is the basis for communicating well (Franco-Cuartas, 2001, 62), it is by refining emotional competence that quality communication can be achieved, as well as avoiding a judgmental attitude and preparing to welcome the other, being clear and involving the other in the choices and still not stop at appearances and try to understand the deep meanings of what you are communicating, finally, do not stop at the first obstacle, never stop forming, sharing experiences, making good plans of action and sharing goals.

Encouraging and improving communication is an educational challenge that involves the holistic development of the person and the entire community.

The educational community that shares times, spaces, reflections, decision-making processes, the same institutional climate, participation, and active, creative, and disinterested involvement that counts on the synergies of all in a common educational project, shows that communication is the basis for understanding, understanding and coexistence (Guzón-Nestar & González-Alonso, 2019, 33).

From this perspective, communication becomes the fertile ground of encounter and the foundation of every community (Pati, 1984, 61).

Acquiring or enhancing communication skills can be the key to sustaining the school-family educational relationship.

2. The investigation with foreign parents

As it was possible to deepen the life contexts in which the person grows and acts, they are undergoing profound change; many emerging skills need to be developed, while others need to be rethought and made functional to the transformations taking place. The development of increasingly multicultural contexts is an example of this. The school is today a melting pot of cultures, ethnic groups, traditions, specificities because of migratory movements and globalization.

Communication between school and non-indigenous families is affected by non-specific and contextual criticalities. As mentioned in paragraph 1, socio-cultural and work contexts are evolving and there is a deep gap between the skills that should be developed, and the real skills deployed. Among them, the lack of acquisition of interpersonal and communicative skills are widely unspecific critical issues; while the various communication barriers (linguistic difficulties, educational level reached, teacher training) that can be encountered, may be linked to contextual peculiarities.

As part of the study on school-family communication, it was decided to start an in-depth study on the degree of participation and skills possessed by non-native parents, as well as on the critical issues encountered by them with respect to the relationship with school operators.

The purpose of the survey was therefore: to understand the participatory and communicative methods implemented in school settings between school operators and non-native families. The objectives developed are:

1. identify the type of family involvement that is most widespread among multicultural families.
2. Identify the communication methods put in place by families.
3. Understand what the major difficulties are encountered by immigrant families with respect to communication with school operators.

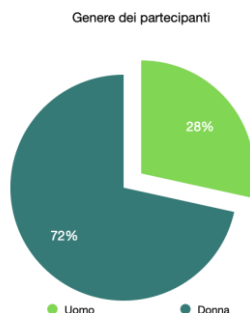
The study is the result of a collaboration with the Complutense University of Madrid and with the *Departamento de Lingüística, Estudios Árabes, Hebreos y de Asia Oriental* and involves a design with a Mixed Method able to refer to the complexity of the phenomenon in question. Here, however, we will discuss only the results relating to section B of the semi-structured questionnaire on the participation/communication of non-indigenous families whose data are purely quantitative. In harmony with the skills expected for 2025 outlined by the WEC (2020), it was decided to analyze some criteria such as: problem solving skills, self-management and working within a community, predictors of good competence communicative; to this was added the criterion relating to verbal and non-verbal communication since it is believed that most of the messages conveyed within a communicative exchange are non-verbal.

Criteria analyzed by the questionnaire		
Section A	Section B	Section C
Parenting	Problem solving	Communication with teachers
Communication	Self-management	Criticalities (own and of school operators)
Volunteering	Working with people	Strengths
Learning at home	Verbal and non-verbal communication	
Decision making		
Community collaborations		

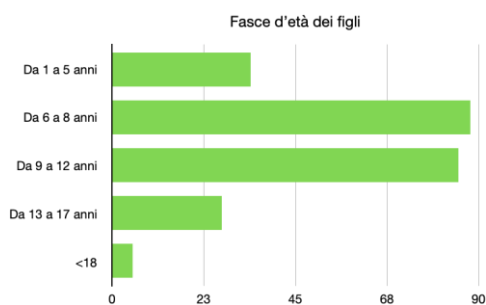
Table 3: "Questionnaire criteria".

1.1. The recipients

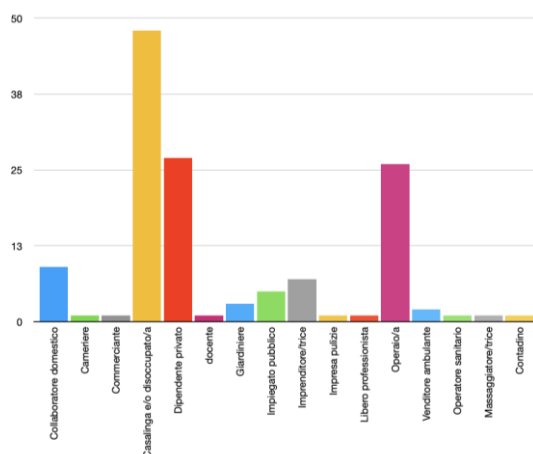
Overall, 239 non-native parents participated in the survey. The sample is not representative of the reference population, as it is a convenience sample. The average age of the participants is 41 years old. In the following graphs it is possible to identify the sex of the parents who participated in the survey (see graph 1) and the age groups of the children (see graph 2) and the work carried out by the parents (see graph 3).



Graph 1: "Gender of the participants".



Graph 2: "Age ranges of children".



Graph 3: "Lavoro svolto dai partecipanti".

Tables 4 and 5, on the other hand, show the countries of origin and the current province of residence of the foreign parents.

Continente	Nazione	Frequenza assoluta	Percentuale	Continente	Nazione	Frequenza assoluta	Percentuale	
Africa	Algeria	2	0,8%	Asia	Arabia Saudita	1	0,4%	
	Camerun	3	1,2%		Bangladesh	15	6,4%	
	Costa D'Avorio	2	0,8%		Cina	6	2,5%	
	Egitto	2	0,8%		Georgia	1	0,4%	
	Eritrea	1	0,4%		India	10	4,2%	
	Ghana	7	3%		Malaysia	1	0,4%	
	Isole Mauritius	5	2,1%		Pakistan	3	1,2%	
	Marocco	12	5,1%		Sri Lanka	9	3,8%	
	Nigeria	10	4,2%		Europa	Albania	11	4,7%
	Senegal	3	1,2%			Bulgaria	2	0,8%
	Somalia	1	0,4%			Francia	3	1,2%
	Tunisia	15	6,4%			Galles	1	0,4%
	Kenya	1	0,4%			Germania	4	1,7%
America	Argentina	3	1,2%	Grecia		2	0,8%	
	Bolivia	1	0,4%	Moldavia	3	1,2%		
	Brasile	6	2,5%	Polonia	7	3%		
	Canada	1	0,4%	Romania	42	18%		
	Colombia	1	0,4%	Russia	3	1,2%		
	Cuba	2	0,8%	Spagna	5	2,1%		
	Ecuador	1	0,4%	Ucraina	1	0,4%		
	Honduras	1	0,4%	Svizzera	2	0,8%		
	Perù	1	0,4%	Non Specificato		27	11,5%	
	Usa	5	2,1%	Totale		233		

Table 4: "Countries of origin of parents".

Province	Absolute frequency	Percentage	Province	Absolute frequency	Percentage
<i>Agrigento</i>	16	6,6%	<i>Palermo</i>	72	30%
<i>Bergamo</i>	2	0,8%	<i>Parma</i>	1	0,4%
<i>Brescia</i>	1	0,4%	<i>Pavia</i>	1	0,4%
<i>Caltanissetta</i>	1	0,4%	<i>Ragusa</i>	11	4,6%
<i>Catania</i>	43	17,9%	<i>Roma</i>	12	5%
<i>Enna</i>	13	5,4%	<i>Siracusa</i>	3	1,2%
<i>Genova</i>	12	5%	<i>Torino</i>	2	0,8%
<i>Macerata</i>	1	0,4%	<i>Trapani</i>	18	7,5%
<i>Messina</i>	1	0,4%	<i>Verona</i>	1	0,4%
<i>Milano</i>	12	5%	<i>Non specificato</i>	16	6,6%

Table 5: "Parents' current province of residence".

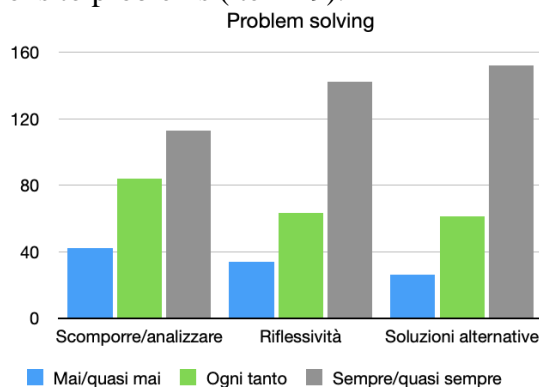
1.2. Analysis of the results

With respect to the three key objectives of the survey carried out declared in paragraph 2 and consistent with the intention of focusing on the analysis of the data in section B, the results, and inferences with respect to the second objective will be presented: "identifying the communication methods implemented by non-indigenous families".

The analysis of the results relating to section B of the questionnaire was conducted with the aid of the Apple operating system software "Numbers".

With respect to problem solving skills, the participants were asked about:

- decomposition and analysis of a problem from several points of view (item 25).
- Analysis of situations with reflexivity and calm (item 28).
- Search for alternative solutions to problems (item 29).



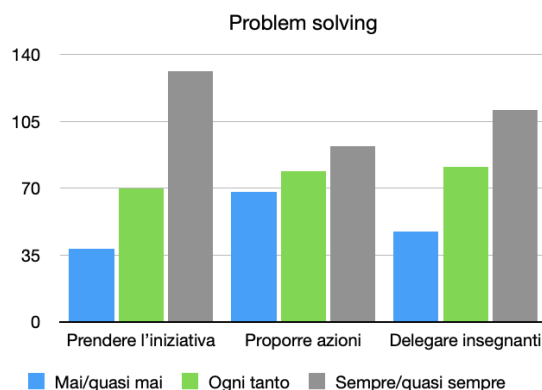
Graph 4: "Problem solving skills".

According to the perception of parents, the results converge towards excellent percentages of people who claim to be able to break down problems and analyze them with reflexivity, finding alternative solutions.

Other operational aspects were analyzed, such as:

- the ability to take the initiative to find a solution to a problem (item 30).
- The ability to propose specific actions to be implemented (item 31).
- The tendency to delegate teachers to solve problems that arise at school (item 32).

In this case the results change considerably, as can be seen from the graph. In fact, the percentages of answers that converge towards "never", "almost never" and "every now and then" increase, suggesting that with respect to the ability to undertake concrete problem-solving actions some parents prefer to delegate the task to the school (see graph. 5).

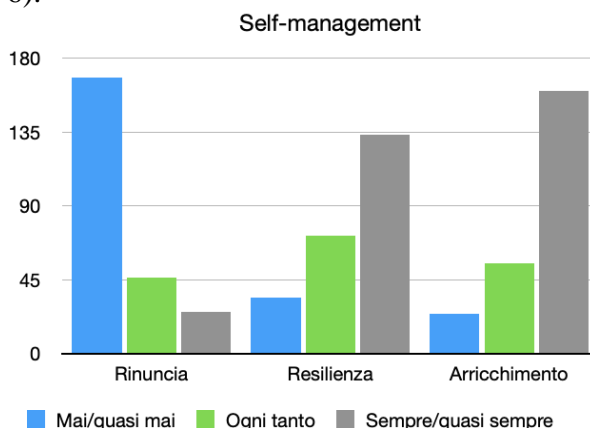


Graph 5: "Operational problem-solving skills".

With respect to the self-management criterion, the parents expressed themselves towards:

- the tendency to give in when faced with problems (item 34).
- The tendency to remain calm in the face of stressful situations (item 35).
- Desire for professional enrichment through meeting others (item 33).

The results tend to confirm good self-management skills both with respect to personal resilience and the desire to enrich oneself thanks to meeting others. So much so that 42.6% declare that they never give up when faced with problems and 55.6% that they remain calm and do not get overwhelmed by angry emotions (see graph 6).

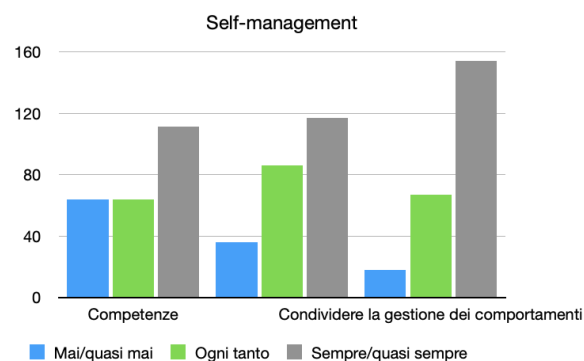


Graph 6: "Self-management skills".

Furthermore, it is asked:

- if you try to implement your own skills (item 36).
- If we share the responsibility and management of the problems that can arise at school (item 37).
- If you share the responsibility and management of your child's behavior at school (item 38).

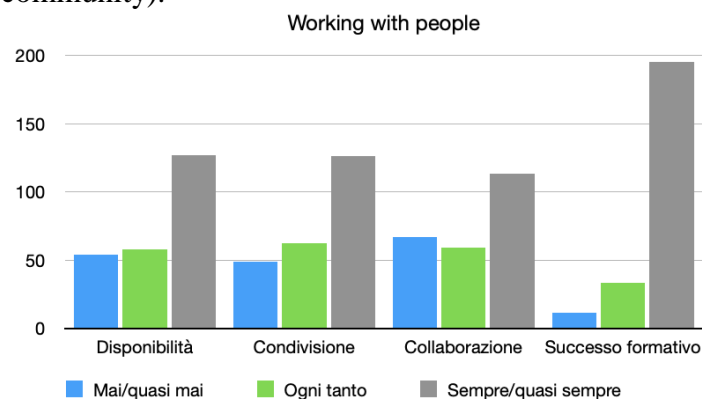
Also, in this case the parents seem to confirm the trend, although the results seem to diverge with respect to the advancement of their skills (see graph 7).



Graph 7: "Self-management skills – part 2".

With respect to the Working with people criterion, the moments of self-reflection concerned:

- personal willingness to work with a group of people (item 39).
 - Sharing information in their possession with other parents (item 40).
 - Collaboration with the parents' group (item 42).
 - The awareness that the educational success of one's child depends on everyone's actions (item 43).
- Although most parents have shown a good propensity for collaboration, sharing and availability, please note that there are important percentages of responses that converge towards the possibility of an "never" and "almost never" answer. In fact, 22.5% of the interviewees declared that they were not available to collaborate; 20.5% said they did not share information with other parents; 28% said they did not cooperate with other parents; however, there is an important 81.5% who believe that educational success depends on the integrated actions of all the parties involved (parent group, faculty, manager, and community).

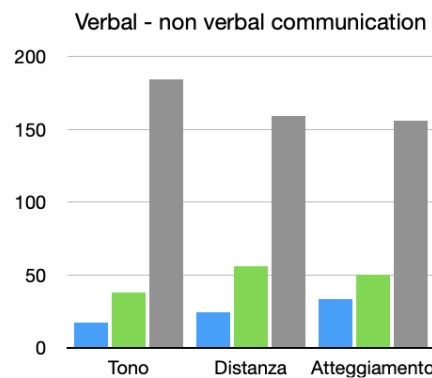


Graph 8: "Working with people criterion".

Finally, the last criterion tested concerns verbal and non-verbal communication. In this regard, the parents were asked:

- if they tend to regulate their tone of voice when talking to teachers and parents (item 44).
- If we tend to maintain physical-emotional distance (item 45).
- If a polite and respectful attitude is maintained (item 46).

In all cases, the perception of parents clearly tends towards a preference for a certain physical and emotional distance, towards using a calm tone towards assuming a respectful attitude.

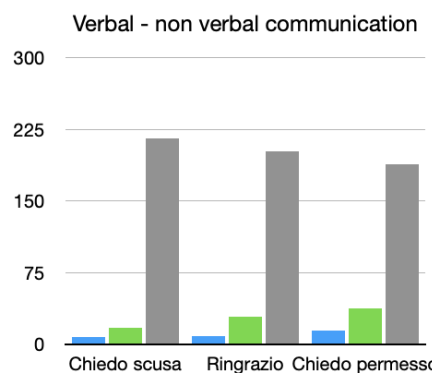


Graph 9: "Verbal-Non verbal communication criterion".

As for the more purely verbal aspects, he asked himself if we tend to:

- apologize if necessary (item 47).
- Thank the teachers for their work (item 48).
- Ask for permission to speak to regulate speaking shifts.

Also in this case, the parents' perception tends towards positive and encouraging results for which excellent verbal and para-verbal skills can be deduced.



Graph 10: "Verbal-Non verbal communication criterion - part 2".

Final reflections

The survey carried out with foreign parents allows the focus of some possible training needs of the same. Reflecting on how parents perceive their communication skills could open reflections and possible training actions to be undertaken. For example, we have seen how, with respect to problem solving skills, most parents think they know how to break down and analyze problems, find alternative solutions, but also take actions, propose solutions; however, the percentages of people who claim to never or almost never do any of this are quite significant and, moreover, they increase when compared to the possibility of taking concrete actions with respect to their ability to solve a problem. The same situation occurs with respect to the self-management criterion and with respect to some verbal and para-verbal components. However, what emerged from the analysis of the working with people criterion deserves a separate discussion, a competence strictly connected to communication skills, which seems to be lacking compared to important percentages of responses.

As mentioned, the survey carried out is a starting point for the development of research actions aimed at training and strengthening the communicative component and interpersonal competence with a view to personal and professional updating of parents and the transformation in progress outlined. in professional contexts.

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