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E-learning during the COVID-19 lockdown: An interview study with primary school music teachers in Italy

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journals.sagepub.com/home/ijm**Michele Biasutti** 

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Abstract

The present article provides an in-depth look at the strategies and practices developed by a cohort of primary school music teachers in Italy to deliver online music lessons during the COVID-19 lockdown. We used a qualitative methodology based on semi-structured interviews to bring out our participants' voices and reflections in a very personal manner and examine their perspectives on issues important to their profession and daily work. We were interested in investigating which practices and strategies were used or developed to deal with the difficulties and positive aspects characterising their experiences as teachers during the lockdown period. A focus was put on lesson planning, time management, student involvement, and information and communication technology (ICT) skills. Qualitative data were analysed using an inductive method based on grounded theory, giving rise to the five following dimensions: classroom activities; the role of the school and staff members; teachers' interactions with children and their parents; positive outcomes; unresolved challenges. Participants discussed how they used ICT and managed their classes remotely, provided vivid descriptions of their professional relationships with colleagues and students, and reflected on the advantages and disadvantages of teaching music remotely, pointing to new ways to improve current teaching methodologies.

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Keywords

Music in schools, music teaching, primary schools, remote music learning

Introduction

Teaching music in the context of a primary school setting is characterised by a different set of challenges from those existing among other age groups or in specialist institutions such as music conservatories (Wiggins & Wiggins, 2008). These challenges, among others, involve music's role in the curriculum, the teacher's musical and paedagogical skills, learning objectives, as well as the methods of teaching delivery (i.e. teaching styles and methodologies). Music is well known to play a marginal role in primary school contexts compared to other disciplines, with only a few hours available and often in confined spaces (Kenny, 2017) – elements that often affect teachers' self-confidence and attitudes when delivering music classes (Hennessy, 2000). These facts were emphasised further during the COVID-19 lockdown period, with simplified music activities and less homework (Shaw & Mayo, 2022). It has been previously suggested that primary school teachers' musical expertise is usually somewhat limited and that they have little confidence when teaching music (Biasutti, 2010; Hietanen & Ruismäki, 2017). This set of difficulties challenge primary school teachers' everyday activities, but it also makes it hard for them to design purely online music lessons.

In the last two decades, the use of ICT in music teaching has been thoroughly investigated (Waddell & Williamon, 2019). From a teaching perspective, technologies enabling remote teaching have often been associated with more flexible time-management and organisation (Biasutti, 2017) - two important aspects of music teaching more generally (Schiavio et al., 2020). Students reported how the accessibility of online environments, combined with the comforts of being at home, could play an important role in driving their learning trajectories (Gherheş et al., 2021). Moreover, remote teaching enabled instrumental teachers to incorporate a wider range of technologies (Daubney & Fautley, 2020). Other studies highlighted how possible issues regarding remote music teaching involved the use of devices such as mobile phones and computers with poor-quality speakers and microphones (Biasutti, 2015, 2018), or limited bandwidth leading to signal freezing and delays (Okay, 2021).

The recent COVID-19 pandemic has pushed many countries to rely heavily on remote teaching, with schools being asked to provide distance learning activities. Italy was one of the first countries to comprehensively implement an emergency response for education, and several studies adopting a qualitative methodology have explored the immediate consequences that might emerge for music teaching and learning during such a period of time (Biasutti et al., 2021; Schiavio et al., 2021). A first semi-structured interview study examined the strategies and practices adopted by conservatory-level music professors to deliver lessons online in different European countries (including Italy) and the USA (Biasutti et al., 2021). A second open-ended survey study reported on, and contextualised, the views of 20 students enrolled at an Italian conservatory regarding the efficiency of the new remote education settings (Schiavio et al., 2021). These studies, among others, revealed how teachers and students often received little institutional support but were still able to achieve ambitious objectives when they treated the novel paedagogical landscape as an opportunity to explore different approaches, become familiar with new technological resources, and find original ways to establish professional relationships with colleagues and students beyond formal classroom situations. In this scenario, however, only few data are available that specifically focus on primary schools.

Methods

Aims and research questions

The present study examined the strategies and practices adopted by primary school teachers to deliver music lessons online during the COVID-19 lockdown. A qualitative methodology based on semi-structured interviews enabled us to collect rich sets of personal impressions and to outline the general picture of how music teaching in Italian primary schools changed. The following research questions were considered:

- (i) How do primary school music teachers describe their experiences of online teaching?
- (ii) How did pupils and their families react to the paedagogical switch caused by the COVID-19 emergency measures?
- (iii) What positive and negative outcomes should we consider for improving teachers' professional activities?

Participants

Participants were recruited through social media, personal contacts and e-mails sent to several primary schools in Italy. The inclusion criteria were that teaching music was one of the participant's main teaching duties, that they had directly experienced e-learning and remote music teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic, and that they had at least 10 years of teaching experience in primary schools. Participants were 16 teachers (13 women; 3 men), and their ages ranged between 37 and 61 years old, with an average of 47.93 years old ($SD=8.01$), and an average of 20.62 years of teaching experience (range: 10–37 years; $SD=8.97$). Participation was voluntary, and teachers received no payment or financial reward for taking part in this study. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym (P-I to P-XVI) to ensure anonymity. Table 1 offers an overview of the participants.

Data collection

Individual, semi-structured interviews were performed via Zoom during Summer 2021. Each interview was transcribed verbatim and returned to participants to allow them to think over their answers, modify relevant parts, or add additional elements if they wished to. Interviews were carried out in Italian by a student assistant, who also analysed the qualitative data independently for his individual project. For the present paper, however, all data were re-analysed, with relevant quotes being translated into English and fitted into a new context and narrative. The interview protocol was developed by the first author in another study (Biasutti et al., 2021) examining how conservatory-level music teachers responded to the sudden pedagogical change provoked by the lockdown measures in their respective teaching settings (i.e. institutions in the EU and the USA). Despite these differences, the qualitative interview methodology proved flexible enough to elicit meaningful responses from our cohort of participants working in primary schools in Italy, whose experiences and challenges may have been very different from those of their colleagues working in HE. The current study was carried out in agreement with the Declaration of Helsinki and the Code of Ethics and Conduct of the British Psychological Society. All subjects gave their informed consent before taking part in the study.

Table 1. Participants, gender, age, years of teaching experience and subjects taught in primary school.

Participants	Gender	Age	Teaching experience (years)	Subjects taught
P-I	F	52	21	Italian, music
P-II	F	56	36	Languages, music
P-III	F	40	16	Music, arts, physical education
P-IV	F	44	14	Music
P-V	F	55	20	Music
P-VI	M	37	10	Music
P-VII	F	61	37	Music
P-VIII	F	35	13	Music
P-IX	M	42	10	Music, Spanish
P-X	F	43	17	Music
P-XI	F	57	32	Music, maths, sciences
P-XII	M	38	13	Music
P-XIII	F	46	12	Music, history, geography
P-XIV	F	51	20	Italian, physical education, music
P-XV	F	57	30	Music, art, English
P-XVI	F	53	29	Music, maths

Data analysis

All interview transcripts were merged into a Word file, segmented into short(er) quotes and analysed using a grounded theory approach. The first analytical step was a thorough familiarisation with the dataset. This included a series of in-depth readings of the entire raw data, with small memos and sidenotes being generated as interpretations of various statements that highlighted overarching themes. These preliminary units of meaning were developed to capture the ideas, experiences, and reflections offered up by our participants about particular issues, and they were discussed collectively by the research team before being organised around concepts. Once all the authors had agreed on this classification of meanings by code, they were clustered into five dimensions:

- classroom activities;
- the roles of schools and staff members;
- teachers interactions with children and their parents;
- positive outcomes;
- unresolved challenges.

In the next sections, we explore each dimension and its codes through selected quotes from our participants.

Findings

Classroom activities

Our teachers described several important aspects of how their everyday school activities changed due to the implementation of remote teaching, and the following codes emerged: *teaching contents and delivery* and *teaching objectives*.

Teaching contents and delivery. Music lessons at the primary school level often involved collaborative music-making. However, things rapidly changed due to the pandemic, and teachers had to adapt to the new e-learning environment:

‘Without [doing] group music [. . .] I was in a bit of trouble because I didn’t know how to do it. I [therefore] have done a lot of listening and rhythm [exercises] as well as music history and music theory’. (P-XVI)

This change in content and means of delivery was easier said than done. As another participant reported, younger children may prefer concrete musical activities to theory-based content, and teachers may have to propose new initiatives to compensate for the lack of (musical) interaction:

‘With the younger children, it was not easy. The lesson often consisted of reading out the notes together or counting out the rhythm. [. . .] One day, I [video]recorded myself while I was building a rainstick, as a tutorial. The pupils had a lot of fun building it together with their parents or siblings’. (P-VI)

The supporting roles of pupils’ families remained an important feature in remote forms of learning. However, another example revealed how the focus of music lessons shifted from the practical to involving fewer movement-based activities:

‘In terms of remote teaching, I threw myself into listening. As I also teach English, I did some intercultural things, for example [listening to] pieces of Celtic music and exploring which musical instruments were used, and then I added art to see what this particular music aroused (emotions, colours)’. (P-XV)

Music teachers had to re-assess their classroom activities to give music a more distinctive role within their newly developed paedagogical landscape:

‘DAD¹ has sacrificed music for other skills, such as using a PC or tablet, or the urgency of the Italian and mathematics programmes. But as a musician, I never thought of eliminating music, so I changed my way of being in the classroom and in front of the PC, putting music everywhere. Nursery rhymes, rhythms of all kinds, and songs with well-known melodies but [new] lyrics invented by us that helped us to learn’. (P-III)

Next, we look at whether similar structural changes were also reflected in the objectives that teachers placed at the heart of their activities.

Teaching objectives are a central aspect of teaching, and learning gravitates around setting goals that both teachers and pupils can achieve. The sudden shift to distance learning described here, however, proved to be challenging, even for very experienced teachers, and their goals were not always successfully achieved:

‘I couldn’t keep to my goals. Making music in primary school also means using Orff instruments, but this year it couldn’t be done, besides the fact that you couldn’t sing. So, we mainly listened to videos from various musical genres [. . .]. We thought a lot about the importance of music in everyday life to get them to understand that making music and doing it well are not a waste of time’. (P-XIV)

Although modes of lesson delivery and their contents changed, as we saw above, teachers’ objectives were not modified before they began remote teaching:

‘The objectives remained unchanged. The main objective is to make children aware that music is a discipline that is based on non-verbal language, and this therefore activates processes that are primarily

thoughts. [. . .] It also allows you to develop skills connected with the whole life of a human being. And then another goal is to pass on this skill, which is an essential passion for children to have'. (P-XII)

The roles of schools and staff members

The statements reported in this section offer insights into whether (and how) schools and staff members supported the transition to online teaching. Codes for this category were: *support for teaching* and *teachers' collaborations and personal initiatives*.

Support for teaching. The following quote illustrates that teachers received little appropriate institutional support either from the schools in which they worked or from more centralised institutions:

'DAD has great potential, but, in the end, it takes a lot of preparation time if you want to do a good job. Furthermore, it is necessary to educate teachers and pupils on how to use its many possibilities. . . and this is not always possible or effective. For now, transposing face-to-face lessons into DAD has been very limited and limiting—as far as I am concerned—forcing us to delegate an unfortunately large portion of the didactic load to individual work, which is hardly or not at all monitored'. (P-IV)

Schools can provide different degrees of support, ranging from almost nothing to training courses specifically designed to facilitate the transition to remote teaching. The following quotes exemplify this:

'Last year, we did not receive any support because we were all disoriented. From the school [. . .] we never received anything'. (P-XV)

'The school only reshaped the timetable, leaving all the other choices to the teachers. I also had to personally buy an internet package with more gigabytes [to be able to work from home]'. (P-X)

'At the school level, refresher courses were held relating to the use of technologies . . . but there were no references to teaching music in the classroom in the pandemic period'. (P-II)

Although most participants received no support, some schools offered their teachers training courses. However, these were not always perceived as useful. Institutional support is not limited to training teachers on how to deal with technology; it also includes providing every pupil with the necessary tools to 'attend' class, which means an 'efficient supply of devices for pupils and, above all, a good internet connection'. (P-VII)

Teachers' collaborations and personal initiatives. Some teachers got more support from their colleagues than from their school:

'I was very [unprepared] technologically, and this experience gave me a big shock, and my colleagues also helped me a lot [. . .]. Here, my colleagues are very collaborative and [during the lockdown] we were even more so than before. With some of my colleagues, we would also call each other up late in the evening to give advice on which methodologies to use in class. It was a positive experience because relationships have improved'. (P-XV)

Although this helpful behaviour was not always promoted by the schools,² it resonated with the experiences described by many other participants as a testimony to the beneficial role that

a positive working environment can have for teachers. As P-V put it, ‘Collaboration [between teachers] was strengthened. We were always in touch, especially via WhatsApp’. This collaborative spirit involved concrete aspects of teaching, such as familiarising each other with ICT resources, negotiating time windows to facilitate teaching and sharing paedagogical material:

‘The teaching team showed openness and collaboration by helping each other and discovering new possibilities in the use of new technological tools’. (P-II)

‘These elements [of remote teaching] have strengthened collegiality and collaboration between us: choosing the times of our lectures, the presence of my colleagues during lessons, and sharing material’. (P-I)

At least one of our participants found no changes concerning the amount of peer collaboration, although how that collaboration occurred was affected by the lockdown measures:

‘Collaboration with colleagues has not changed; the way in which information was exchanged through chat, video calls, et cetera has changed. . . Our meetings, conversely, were quieter’. (P-X)

Teachers’ interactions with children and their parents

We now examine teachers’ reported experiences of their communication with pupils, the latter’s reactions to the new teaching approaches, and the role played by their parents in supporting their learning activities. The codes for this category were *communication*, *reactions to online didactics*, and *parental involvement*.

Communication. Perhaps unsurprisingly, using ICT for online teaching without adequate resources, support and preparation had a negative effect on many pupils, particularly the younger ones.

‘Some pupils were lost; they did not attend the video lessons, and then it was not easy to get them back. [. . .] I teach the second grade, [and] I noticed that many of them really struggled to [interact with others] in front of the PC. Many children are ashamed to ask questions over the computer because they know that there are also parents listening. They seem to be afraid of making a mistake. In DAD, the teacher–pupil relationship is different’. (P-XI)

One reason for the reduced sense of communication might be that many teachers were not familiar enough with the potential of remote learning methods to generate valuable experiences for their pupils. One teacher reported difficulty understanding their pupils’ emotions and interests:

‘I’ve never felt like this. In class, you have them in front of you; it’s all simpler. Here, with these screens, you never know how they are feeling, whether they feel at ease, whether they have understood what’s been explained, whether they liked the lesson. [There is] zero feedback’. (P-XIII)

Even when some forms of interaction could take place, these often displayed a disparity between those pupils who feel more comfortable with technology and those who have to make more of an effort to engage with it:

‘I noticed a lot of requests for help from pupils, and this made me understand their individualities better. Some pupils asked for explanations more frequently, but for others, perhaps shyer, it was necessary to call

out directly to them because they never intervened. . . The level of concentration was very low—they got tired much earlier. The empathy of presence was missing’. (P-X)

The main issue remains that of human contact and direct interaction:

‘I felt a sense of bewilderment because there was no human contact. No tool can compensate for the relationship established when the teacher and the group are present’. (P-IV)

This issue directly affected the reactions that pupils displayed as a part of the lesson’s necessary dynamics.

Reaction to online didactics. The lack of human contact with teachers and peers distressed many pupils. This was particularly evident for those with special needs, as one teacher described:

‘We must remember that there are several children with special needs who are a little ‘cut off’ because they are not [physically] there. At school, I manage to explain things to them better—to help them write and play. At a distance, I often feel helpless’. (P-VIII)

This point emphasises how teachers and pupils did not receive enough help in the face of all the paedagogical challenges involved with rapidly developed remote activities that then shaped most teaching. This had a tremendous impact on those pupils who needed it most:

‘I think DAD is a non-egalitarian mode [of teaching]: it benefits those who have the tools, devices, stable [internet] connections, and their families available. . . but it disadvantages those who do not. I think and hope that this experience will lead to a commitment to allocate greater resources to the preparation of personnel’. (P-X).

Such a disparity probably partly explains why we collected contrasting accounts concerning pupils’ participation, including the following two statements: ‘Some pupils must be constantly solicited to maintain their attention in front of the screen’. (P-IX); ‘In general, [. . .] the children were very attentive and always committed’. (P-XV). This perceived difference might be due to support from pupils’ families.

Parental involvement. Parental involvement was not only needed to guide children with technology³ but also to compensate for the lack of physical presence they would normally experience in the classroom. As one participant reported, their involvement was particularly suited in musical contexts:

‘The lockdown measures [. . .] have certainly made it impossible to practice music in the way we were used to, [which involved] mainly practical lessons in small groups with musical instruments, group research, and subsequent sharing, etc. Particularly with the youngest primary school classes, parental participation played a key role’. (P-IX).

Parental involvement also meant more direct interactions with teachers:

‘In some cases, DAD has helped me to explain to parents the difficulties that some pupils have being in the classroom, and I think this has been a help’. (P-I)

Positive outcomes

Under the codes of *familiarisation with technologies* and *time management*, the dimension of “positive outcomes” includes teachers’ statements associated with the various opportunities for professional and personal development arising from this complex situation.

Familiarisation with technologies. One benefit of switching to online didactics was that many teachers learned how to use new, teaching-friendly technologies. Despite the dramatic conditions that pushed them towards this change, participants dedicated a few words to the experience’s beneficial aspects:

‘This situation helped launch me into the world of technology, removing the taboo that I had for it before: I saw its more positive aspects. Technology can be an interesting resource, [one which I] rediscovered, precisely during this period, even if it is not a priority’. (P-XV)

Another participant echoed this point:

‘One interesting aspect is that we must exploit digital skills and teach children [about them,] to make them aware of the tool they have in their hands. [. . .] having a digital book was really interesting. Having materials and video lessons on a platform (for example, we used WeSchool) is advantageous for pupils because they can have all the material on their computer, reuse it when they want to review the lessons, and always know what educational material was provided’. (P-XIV)

Technologies have the advantage of being able to reach more people, including those who cannot make it to school or find it more comfortable to attend classes from home as participants reported:

‘The possibility of teaching music, even to those who are physically very distant [is the best part of it]—and to those who (I have one pupil in this situation) have a disability and cannot always come to class, and to those who have a mild flu and do not want to come to class but prefer not to miss it and do it online’. (P-VI)

‘We woke up a great deal on the computer side of things. . . both us and the children. You pass materials, notes, information. This will surely be a useful tool even after the pandemic’. (P-VIII)

It would be desirable for the skills and knowledge acquired during the pandemic to be developed further when things get back to normal, perhaps aiming for a good balance between classroom and online activities:

‘[These technologies] opened up new horizons for me, and I found very interesting material for children that I could also use in the classroom. I kept up to date on the programs of other subjects to see if I could connect them to music’. (P-V)

ICT skills may have a considerable impact in the future when it comes to preparing ‘additional material such as slides and maps’ (P-III) or amending existing resources:

‘I have provided more self-study materials. I have edited and reduced some content. I have prepared additional materials such as slides, maps and videos. I have improved my skills in the use of technologies—it’s a sort of self-updating’. (P-X)

Not only do such positive outcomes result from new teaching skills, such as using technology to fine-tune paedagogical materials, but they also involve more practical aspects concerning more personal aspects of one’s everyday life.

Time management. Teaching successfully takes time, so managing time is an important skill that serves many purposes, ranging from providing assessments and feedback to preparing each lesson and setting precise goals and plans. One teacher reported how the new teaching format had helped her improve her time-management capacities:

‘[The new teaching format had one important] positive effect: it helped me to give more importance to time management. It forced me to think about that too. And so, it was good for me to stay within the timings’. (P-XV)

Whereas one participant referred to having ‘learned to set more easily achievable short-term goals’ (P-IX), the following longer quotation provides an account of the variety of positive outcomes experienced by P-XVI, ranging from time no longer stuck in traffic to more communication with children’s parents, which, was a key part of how children learned and remained focussed during remote classes:

‘I got up calmly, drank my coffee without haste, sometimes kept my pyjamas on for comfort. . . I saved a lot of money and did not have to race through the traffic. . . I will miss distance learning. By not travelling from home to school, you have much more time, both for planning lessons and for the parents themselves. We gave them the opportunity to have extra meetings; we wanted to be as close to them as possible, not to make them feel alone. They enjoyed it very much’. (P-XVI)

Unresolved challenges

Of the many challenges that lockdown measures posed to teachers and pupils, three were particularly evident. These were the careful examination of novel assessment techniques, the role of technologies (counterbalancing the positive outcomes reported above) and the lack of bodily activities that often permeate music lessons in the classroom. The codes assigned were *assessments*, *technologies*, and *bodily activities*.

Assessments. The opportunity to change the modalities of assessments during the lockdown gave teachers a chance to explore aspects that are rarely evaluated:

‘Assessments were complicated. Discussing this with colleagues, we decided not to carry out classic assessments but to evaluate the pupil as he or she progressed. . . It was more tiring [than usual], but this allowed us to know pupils better. We looked at their commitment, what they said, their interventions, the attentiveness and much more’. (P-IV)

As another teacher put it, not only were classic assessments not carried out, but remote evaluations (i.e. via a test) were not even considered. Instead, a major emphasis was given to qualities such as participation and commitment:

‘I didn’t do remote assessments, but I looked more at the participation and commitment they put in, although I trusted [them] a lot more because their parents were always behind them’. (P-XI)

Parents were considered positive drivers for pupils’ learning trajectories. Their roles could be considered fundamental during lessons and evaluations. The broader inclusion of parents in their children’s school life could be an interesting development in new assessment methods to support distance learning. One respondent stated:

‘I did not carry out tests from the classroom. With the collaboration of the parents, I asked them to make a video or audio recording while their child played the chosen song’. (P-X)

Technologies. Several teachers positively evaluated how DAD helped them to (re)discover the role of technologies and develop their digital skills further. However, this positive assessment may depend directly on the quality of the ICT resources at their disposal:

‘The quality of the lesson was greatly influenced by the quality of the internet connection and the communication tools used’. (P-VI)

It was very important to provide both teachers and pupils with adequate technical training and resources. Good ICT resources could mitigate the problematic aspects associated with individual music-making:

‘It is very difficult to give a music lesson in these conditions. Music is a unifying subject, and I always try to make that happen, but they are no longer used to being together. [Remote learning] is a more individual school: they can’t be together, they can’t exchange things, they can’t play together. They are no longer able to be together, and fight a lot. [. . .]. I believe that music lessons given in these conditions are of little use to them—certainly less than in a face-to-face lesson’.

‘Can I manage the lesson while sitting [in front of a screen]? It’s impossible in music. For me, music is movement, expression, relationships. . . and technology has removed all of this’. (P-XVI)

Bodily activities. This code focuses on the role of the body and movement in supporting music lessons and how hard it is to implement this in remote settings. The lack of bodily movement seems to impact (albeit in different ways) both pupils and teachers:

‘I gained 12 kilos. . . I’m not kidding! You can’t spend 14 hours a day sitting in front of your computer! It’s crazy. [. . .] With my pupils, I was used to making them move a lot, to use their bodies to express themselves, to let off steam, to express themselves without their voice. Children need to move, through dance and bodily expression [. . .]’. (P-XII)

The final quotation provides a concrete example of how one teacher experienced her pupils’ lack of bodily activities:

‘The lockdown measures have been limiting because they took away a sphere of objectives and skills that I consider fundamental for children: that of experimenting with their own bodies. I have studied singing at school [and] singing has helped me to [develop] my emotional sphere and self-control. Breathing gives you tranquillity and serenity, and this is very important; the expiration of breath is a skill that you must experiment with. Then there is the whole sphere of having a musical ear (a voice in tune, a voice that’s neither too loud nor too quiet) that we cannot [examine]. Music touches all other competencies [. . .] for 360 degrees. The lack of singing was a great impoverishment, and I had to promote other skills, such as listening and rhythm and analysing musical parameters’. (P-XVI)

Discussion and conclusion

The present study examined the verbal descriptions and reflections offered up by a cohort of Italian primary school teachers concerning their experiences of delivering music lessons remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings could be considered as a platform of ideas from which to

discuss how to improve online music teaching in primary schools and which positive elements could be maintained when returning to face-to-face teaching. Participants were aware of both the potential benefits and the restrictions of remote e-learning, and they expressed different views regarding the value of pupils learning music remotely.

Although there is a wealth of research examining different aspects of instrumental teaching (Calderón-Garrido et al., 2019; Camlin & Lisboa, 2021), few studies have analysed its specifics with primary schools and young children (Burton & Pearsall, 2016). In these contexts, it has been argued that using ICT is effective at enhancing pupil engagement in music classes (Woody, 2021) and their perception of music in primary school (Kim, 2013). Our first research question inquired about teachers' experiences of remote music education (*How do primary school music teachers describe their experiences of online teaching?*), and this allowed us to complement and extend other existing findings. Our participants reported often being disoriented by the sudden paedagogical changes resulting from the pandemic, and this negatively affected their ability to design lessons, define learning objectives, and evaluate their pupils (Shaw & Mayo, 2022). According to previous research, reasons for this often lie in poor technological set-ups and unstable internet connections (Okay, 2021). However, some teachers took advantage of ICT by adapting their teaching style to the available technology, suggesting that poor technical support was not the only factor at play. Moreover, we noticed that although different theoretical aspects of music had been part of the teaching content before the pandemic, their mode of delivery online involved PowerPoint presentations rather than 'live' stories. Teachers perhaps felt the need to align their lessons with the technology, thereby transforming existing, well-established activities into ones that appeared more suited to e-learning.

Regarding the second research question (*How did pupils and their families react to the sudden paedagogical switch caused by the COVID-19 emergency measures?*), participants highlighted how families were more present than usual in supporting their child's education, which emphasised the importance of maintaining contact with them and how vital communication with parents is while learning. The role of parents during the early stages of musical development has been thoroughly investigated (Davidson & Borthwick, 2002), but less research has been devoted to the role they may have in compensating for the physical absence of teachers, as in the present investigation. Our findings provide new views, complementing existing literature that has argued that while e-learning has ensured didactic continuity, it has somewhat weakened the relationships between pupils and teachers (Antonini Philippe et al., 2020). Communication between peers and student-teacher interaction plays key roles in musical development (Creech & Hallam, 2011) and in education more generally (Longobardi et al., 2016). Teachers' interpersonal skills, such as responsiveness are particularly useful here because, for pupils, seeing and talking to their teachers, listening to their voices, seeking advice, and discussing things in the class are fundamental aspects of the learning process, which can only partially be substituted by that of their parents. The lockdown period created new scenarios, and it would be helpful to compare contextual musical activities that children could perform alone, with peers, with their teacher or with their parents.

Regarding the third research question (*What positive and negative outcomes should we consider for improving teachers' professional activities?*), several aspects regarding familiarisation with ICT and professional development activities were highlighted. As we have seen, ICT were considered both a limitation and a strength. And, in agreement with previous research (Hash, 2021), one of the main difficulties was the lack of technological skills among teachers. However, despite the circumstances, participants had chances and time to improve and develop those skills. Regarding the roles of schools and of their staff members, several of our participants called for more institutional support. The latter could take various forms, including the organisation of professional development activities or training (Hyun Kim, 2021). Not only could such activities boost teachers' confidence – which is often an issue

in primary school settings (Mills, 1989) – they could also represent an essential means of familiarising teachers with technology and collaborative teaching and learning settings.

The current study had some limitations. As our interviews were carried out with a small cohort of participants in Italy, its findings cannot be generalised across international settings. Inherent in any retrospective study design are the risks and challenges associated with memory recall. Nevertheless, the present research provides valuable insights into issues that will be relevant to primary school teachers who might be asked to design and deliver music classes remotely, even after the lockdown period. Further studies are needed in this area. Problems that were not addressed include differences between public and private schools and between pupils of different ages and cultural backgrounds.

In conclusion, we are left to wonder whether the lockdown measures implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic should be considered – in purely pedagogical terms – as a limitation or as a new opportunity for primary school music teachers. There is no single answer as teachers' experiences are all different and associated with their own cultural, social and institutional contexts. Teachers who follow the latest technological innovations and who have a desire to discover new musical scenarios and educational approaches might perceive teaching music remotely as an opportunity for professional development – one that also enriches their pupils and helps them to flourish. Conversely, the lack of institutional support and preparation made it hard for teachers to experience this transition with sufficient confidence and positivity. We hope that the present research provides the broader music education community with the chance to think about both perspectives and that the experiences and knowledge gained during the lockdown period can be treasured to improve the working conditions of primary school music teachers more generally.

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Notes

1. DAD stands for '*didattica a distanza*', the semi-official Italian term to label all paedagogical activities carried out remotely.
2. For example, as one teacher put it 'I have certainly reduced contacts with my colleagues'. (P-VI).
3. As one participant reported, for example, 'Small children do not yet have the maturity needed for DAD and therefore the help of an adult was fundamental'. (P-I)

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