Can children develop an efficient and aware study method since primary school? An exploratory study on challenges and opportunities

I bambini possono acquisire un metodo di studio efficace e consapevole fin dalla scuola primaria? Uno studio qualitativo su sfide e opportunità

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ABSTRACT

The development of an efficient and aware study method proves to be one of the most demanding educational challenges, even for secondary and university students. With the purpose of investigating the role played by primary school as starting point for practicing and gaining early study skills, this paper illustrates and discusses the results of an exploratory study conducted through a focus group attended by five primary school teachers working at "Don Lorenzo Milani", a Comprehensive Institute of Montespertoli, Province of Florence, Central Italy—which adheres to the "Backpack-free [*Senza Zaino*]" project. The discussion was designed to gather insights in relation to five main areas: teachers' knowledge of reference constructs, daily practices implemented, obstacles to be faced, the contribution given by educational technologies and further enabling steps. The results, serving as a basis for future and broader surveys, reveal the need to act on both teachers and students' now rooted beliefs and approaches in favour of metacognitive attitudes and informed use of educational technologies.

L'acquisizione di un metodo di studio efficiente e consapevole mostra di essere una delle sfide educative più impegnative, anche per studenti di scuola secondaria e universitari. Allo scopo di indagare il ruolo svolto dalla scuola primaria come punto di partenza per esercitare e acquisire competenze di studio precoci, il presente articolo illustra e discute i risultati di uno studio esplorativo condotto attraverso un focus group al quale hanno partecipato cinque insegnanti di scuola primaria operanti presso l'Istituto Comprensivo "Don Lorenzo Milani" di Montespertoli, in provincia di Firenze – aderente al progetto "Senza Zaino". Il dibattito risultante è stato concepito per raccogliere spunti riguardo a cinque aree principali: la conoscenza, da parte degli insegnanti, dei costrutti di riferimento; le pratiche quotidiane implementate; gli ostacoli da affrontare; il contributo fornito dalle tecnologie educative; e, infine, ulteriori passi abilitanti alla competenza. I risultati, che serviranno come base per future e più approfondite indagini, rivelano la necessità di agire sia sulle convinzioni e sugli approcci ormai radicati di insegnanti e studenti, sia a favore di disposizioni metacognitive e dell'uso informato delle tecnologie educative.

KEYWORDS
Critical-reflective learning, Educational technologies, Metacognition, Self-regulation, Study method
Apprendimento critico-riflessivo, Autoregolazione, Metacognizione, Metodo di studio, Tecnologie educative

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1. Introduction

The latest Italian school reforms and regulatory framework highlight the importance of developing competencies that favour the construction of individual's identity and sense of citizenship (Boninelli 2015; Mazzeo, 2005; MIUR, 2012). Therefore, now more than ever the need to promote practices of significant and lifelong learning (Dunlap & Grabinger, 2003) is increasingly emerging. Nevertheless, one of the most frequently and long-lasting reported educational obstacles is learners' difficulty to achieve a valid study method that allows them to relate to knowledge critically and consciously, while making them able to master disciplinary contents to face both school and everyday challenges (Cornoldi et al., 2015). In this regard, recent research (Cornoldi et al., 2015; Meneghetti et al., 2016; Scierri et al., 2018) has stressed secondary and tertiary students' lack of study skills that, to be effective, have to include a set of more complex abilities than just academic ones, such as self-management, task and social control (Pelizzoni et al., 2017). Although several focused interventions have already been implemented, lots of students attending higher educational levels still don't own good study skills since they have always been used to learning contents by heart and repeating them through a mechanical and notional approach, by not reflecting on them and consequently forgetting them shortly after the performance required (Cornoldi, 1995). As Entwistle states, "It might seem that the most immediate change in students' approaches to studying could be achieved by providing appropriate study skills training" (Entwistle, 2000, p. 3).

Based on these considerations, early focused interventions on how to learn to study may be determining in achieving successful outcomes. With the aim of investigating the role played by primary school, which is the starting point for study processes, in both favouring and supporting the development of pupil's efficient and aware study method, this paper illustrates and discusses the results of a focus group conducted with five primary school teachers as part of an exploratory research designed to collect empirical material on the issue. In particular, the paper opens by providing an overview of the reference literature; it then explains the methodology used, by detailing its structure and implementation as well. It continues with the illustration of the themes resulting from the data analysis and their discussion in light of the already existing evidence. The contribution ends by making a recap of the suggestions emerging from participants' direct testimonies, which pave the way to further and broader studies.

2. State of the art

As remarked by Pelizzoni et al. (2017), study skills have intrigued educators for just over a century and are now defined in literature as controllable and consciously applied strategies. These strategies, intentionally used by students, aim to enhance text comprehension and memorization quality and are vital for all study activities.

Study skills are part of the study method, which is a key tool for every student to navigate their educational path and to obtain satisfying results without turning to external supports. Study method is strictly connected to learning, but also to emotional-motivational variables: undoubtedly, when a student lacks study method, she usually feels anxious and insecure, achieving less than what she is capable of because of the impossibility to recover already known information from memory (Cornoldi et al., 2015). Cottini (2006) reviews different studies carried out over the years in teaching contexts and identifies three main constructs that play a decisive role in students' acquisition of a study method: *metacognition*, *self-regulation* and *self-efficacy perception*. (a) The first concept was introduced by Flavell (1976), who defined it as the ability to monitor and self-reflect on one's own cognitive processes in order to be aware and control them, thus becoming able to evaluate the efficacy of adopted strategies and performed tasks. Indeed, "it is defined most simply as *thinking about thinking*" (Lai, 2011, p. 2). (b) The second construct, conceptualized by Zimmerman's (1986) *Self-regulated learning* framework (SRL), is linked to the previous concept of metacognition, but it specifically indicates the learners' abilities to control their learning environment by self-monitoring thoughts, emotions, and behaviours, which is crucial for goal setting and the subsequent organization of study time. (c) Finally, self-efficacy—which was notably developed by Bandura (1996) in his theory of social learning—concerns students' confidence about their own ability to reach required levels in the execution of a task. Consequently, a lack of this component can influence students' learning skills and self-esteem. Self-efficacy relies on various personal factors but also on teachers' optimistic attitude, which can be helpful in eliciting students' trust and encouraging them to remodel their individual perceptions, as well as giving them truly efficient feedbacks (Palmas et al., 2022). Since teachers can be seen as critical mediators of knowledge (Mason, 2000), their behaviour has a fair influence on students' learning achievements and enjoyment, and their availability is an emotional factor enabling students' motivational changes (Urhahne, 2015).

In the literature, three contributions stand out among the many efficient models and procedures developed to be implemented while studying: De Beni and Zamperlin (1993), Thomas and Robinson (1977), and Andrich (2015). De Beni and Zamperlin's (1993) model is based on three main study phases, namely: organization, comprehension, and memorisation. Students' organization involves the conscious management of materials, time, and tasks to be carried out. Comprehension is obtained by multiple and step-by-step readings, while memorisation consists of significantly and permanently storing up information through written and mental strategies. The second outstanding model is Robinson and Thomas' (1977) *PQ4R method*, which depicts six specific operations that should always be carried out by the student:

- *Preview*, that is, skimming the text preliminarily to identify the main themes to be learnt;
- *Questions* students should themselves to get to the heart of the matter;

- *Read*, namely, reading the selected part of the text carefully, trying to provide answers to previously expressed questions;
- *Reflect*, that is, meditating on what students are reading, searching for examples and linking new information in the text to the already learned ones;
- *Recite*, namely, repeating both read contents and given answers to subsequently trace back forgotten data;
- *Review*, which requires to go through the whole thing, attempting to remember the most important concepts and to revise them in general.

Finally, Andrich's five-question model (2015) stresses the importance of improving reading and comprehension processes through metacognitive strategic questions *before, during*, and *after reading,* by problematizing the text in order to make inferences, go forward evident topics, and catch the deepest elements or incongruities. Autobiographical questions related to one's own experience or point of view, as well as those discussed in couples or small groups, are aimed at strengthening attitudes of sharing and cooperation.

In addition, educational technologies may turn out to be a key component in both improving learning processes and promoting content, methodological and structural innovation as well (Bottino, 2015). Their growing developments have made it possible to create *Technology Enhanced Learning Environments* (TELEs), defined as "any real, virtual or hybrid environment where technology plays a role in making learning possible" (Persico & Steffens, 2017, p. 116). In particular, TELEs have shown significant potential to scaffold self-regulative and metacognitive dynamics, by requiring a high degree of student autonomy, well strengthened critical thinking and social skills (Persico & Steffens, 2017). As a consequence, teachers and students are called to overcome a strictly technical approach, which is mostly used in traditional educational environments, for a growing technological-educational mastery that encourages a conscious use of digital technologies for learning (Ranieri, 2022).

Despite the importance of the issue, even students with a longer school experience do not always develop an efficient study method in a spontaneous and autonomous way (De Min Tona et al., 2014) since they developed unprofitable study habits resulting in lacking flexibility, self-regulation, self-efficacy, metacognition, self-esteem, or interest (Cornoldi, 1995; De Min Tona et al., 2014). At the same time, teachers usually believe that the acquisition of a study method requires abilities that are too advanced, which are are impossible for everyone to achieve, and consequently try to teach a standardized theoretical method (Cornoldi, 1995). Moreover, they are not often able to recognize the numerous aspects—including the study of potentially uninteresting topics—which influence the development of a study method because they have not themselves experienced such a process for a long time this process (Cornoldi et al., 2015). Trying to cover this gap, several Cognitive Education action programmes are being implemented to enhance *learn to learn* processes and to improve both teachers' and pupils' approaches (Haywood, 2010).

3. Methodology

3.1 Research aims and approaches

This study inaugurates a campaign to investigate the role played by primary education in introducing learners to study processes, by focusing on primary school teachers' perceptions concerning challenges and opportunities related with the early development of pupils' efficient and conscious study methods. Therefore, even if the topic has been long studied, through a hypothesis-generating process it enjoys the ability to offer additional perspectives on the earliest year of compulsory education (Swedberg, 2020)—that is, through exploratory research aimed at raising questions rather than answering them (Merton, 1973). Although it does not test assumptions, this study endeavours to identify recommendations in relation to the following areas: (a) teachers' awareness of theoretical basics and practical implications related to the constructs of metacognition, self-regulation, and self-efficacy; (b) educational practices implemented to introduce to a study method and then foster it; (c) obstacles to be faced; (d) the contribution of educational technologies; (e) further enabling steps.

After identifying the key points for deeper understanding (Merton, 1987), the investigator employed the focus group research method because it stands out for its exploratory capabilities (Acocella & Cataldi, 2021). This method enables the collection of qualitative data about a specific issue through in-depth discussions. These discussions are guided by a moderator and involve between four and twelve carefully selected participants who are encouraged to share their views based on a set of targeted open-ended questions (Acocella, 2008; Zammuner, 2003).

The focus group method not only fosters strong engagement and motivation among interviewees, including emphasis on their emotional level, but it also helps prevent dominance relationship among peers, thereby ensuring uniform participation (Acocella, 2012). In addition, the focus group is one of those research methodologies frequently used in qualitative research, where literature highlights that the use of small sample sizes is not a limitation; rather, under certain conditions, they can provide significant benefits (Guest et al., 2006; Guest et al., 2017; Hennink et al., 2016; Young & Casey, 2018). More specifically, when participants *are selected according to pre-determined criteria*, when they *share similar experiences*, and when they *engage in partially structured interviews*, a small group may yield rich and robust findings. This approach helps to minimize the burden on participants and maximize the use of limited resources. For instance, a focus group consisting of about four to five members allows more opportunities for individuals to express their own ideas (Stagi, 2000). Moreover, when used as the sole research tool, the most prevalent themes can be identified by organizing only two or three groups (Guest et al., 2017). Furthermore, when the goal is to generate ideas and involve further fields of intervention, exploratory research may also rely on a single case (Boddy, 2016). This method is considered highly thorough and meaningful for examining topics in detail in a non-systematic yet novel

manner (Swedberg, 2020). It provides an opportunity to familiarize with the issue preliminarily, then reflect on and design future surveys leading to more solid and generalizable results (Swedberg, 2014).

3.2 Context and participants

The participants in the focus group are primary school teachers working at Comprehensive Institute [*Istituto Comprensivo*] "Don Lorenzo Milani", located in Montespertoli (Provincee of Florence, Central Italy). In Italy, a Comprehensive Institute is akin to a British Multi-Academy Trust, but it is usually a system of public schools that are consolidated for increased administrative efficiency.

All the schools belonging to "Don Lorenzo Milani" participate in a project called "Backpack-Free [*Senza Zaino*]", which is an innovative educational model established in 2002 and currently involving about 300 other institutes in Italy. *Senza Zaino* is based on three pillars: *hospitality*, *responsibility*, and *community* (Orsi, 2016). Accordingly, school should be a cozy and comfortable environment designed to nurture the students' diverse intelligences and cognitive styles by making each of them protagonist of their own educational pathway. For this reason, learners must feel the desire and be motivated to explore reality through a spontaneous mobilisation of internal resources. That is achieved by personally choosing the activities to be undertaken—which concern real-case scenarios—and by utilizing alternative educational tools (e.g., timetables, personal activity record cards, and educational software), which strengthen the learners' own sense of responsibility.

Another essential component is the care paid to social relationships aimed at developing collaborative and prosocial behaviours, which are functional to sharing and negotiateing meanings in an continuous exchange of knowledge. Indeed, classroom spaces are organized into distinct areas to diversify activities and foster cooperation: tables, mini-lab stations, and an "agora"—reminiscent of the ancient Greek city square—where teachers and students can discuss on topics of mutual interest. At the same time, *Senza Zaino* rejects traditional numerical grades in favour of comments stressing emerging strengths and/or weaknesses. All these measures are specifically promoted to enahnce the development of students' autonomy, metacognition (Flavell, 1976), self-regulation (Zimmerman, 1986) and self-efficacy perception (Bandura, 1996), contributing to their effective learning, which is the ultimate goal of a valid study method.

Within such educational context, all the teachers acquainted with the investigator were contacted—that is, 15 individuals. This was in excess of the maximum number of envisaged participants but ensured full participation in case many turned down the opportunity. Eventually, five female teachers working at Don Lorenzo Milani attended the meeting. Their mean age was 57 years (min = 50; max = 63) and enjoyed an average teaching experience of ~26 years (min = 10; max = 37). The sample consists of teachers belonging to various subject fields and grades, according to MIUR's (2012) classification. At the time the research was undertaken, two participants belonged to the linguistic-artistic-expressive area (Grade 1 and Grade 3); another two were included in the STEM (Grade 1 and Grade 5); the extant was a teacher of Catholic Religious Education (IRC) who taught at all primary grades. Such diversity allowed the investigator to gather information at multiple levels and in different contexts.

3.3 Data collection

The focus group took place in July 2022 on Google Meet platform and lasted about two hours. There were no observers, and the conversation was documented by voice-recording under participants' express consent. After fostering a climate of mutual exchange, the debate was directed towards a semi-structured series of questions formulated by the investigator, who acted as conductor-mediator providing the interviewees with food for thought to foster their interaction (Acocella, 2008; Zammuner, 2003). According to the existing literature and starting from the areas mentioned in *Section 3.1*, targeted stimulus questions were developed as reported below:

1. Since the development of a good study method requires a set of metacognitive strategies that enable students to reflect and intervene on their own cognitive processes, by also promoting self-regulatory behaviours and self-efficacy perception, how relevant is—in your opinion—getting children used to assuming aware and critical attitudes in relation to the contents they learn from the very first years of primary school? In this regard, do you think primary school is moving towards a metacognitive direction? Specifically, what is your understanding of metacognitive teaching?
2. What are the ways in which do you usually introduce pupils to study processes? Following the initial phase, which educational practices do you keep implementing in your daily teaching to support them?
3. Do you believe the approaches you implement may sometimes be limiting or—based on your experience—are there any false beliefs/hidden convictions by both teachers and students hindering study processes? If yes, why? How do you usually deal with them?
4. Do you think educational technologies can support metacognitive learning? Do you integrate them into your teaching practice? If yes, how?
5. With a view to further steps, do you think it would be necessary to make teaching staff reach greater awareness on the issue? If yes, how?

3.4 Data analysis

Being the focus group a qualitative research method (Acocella, 2008; Zammuner, 2003), data were analysed through techniques of content analysis, conducted on the basis of the discussion transcript involving verbal codes such as the peer-to-peer conversations, speeches, comments and phraseologies. After transcribing the participants' statements, which were pro-

vided following the stimulus questions asked by the conductor, the text has been systematically segmented to identify different analytical units from which several codes have been derived. The latter ones got labelled accordingly—that is, with specific tags—which were then aggregated into five main themes (Semeraro, 2011). Each participant has was pseudonymized and was thus assigned a nominal cardinal progressive index, from P1 to P5, to better identify the origin of the statements and to prevent ambiguities in the attribution.

4. Results

Data analysis was carried out with the aim of examining participants' self-reported perceptions and opinions. In the next subparagraphs, the results of the focus group will be described according to the five themes that emerged from the analysis itself.

4.1 The role of metacognition

Notwithstanding its relevance for study processes, participants stated they still found it challenging to understand in depth the construct of metacognition since they had never received training in the subject matter; therefore, they argued, their approach was based on direct experiences with their students, so much that they did not currently recognize the methodologies they use on a daily basis to deal with the metacognitive dimension of learning. Indeed, P1 affirms:

> Metacognition has not been discussed for a long time […]. I remember that I didn't know this term in the early years of my teaching experience, and I began to understand its meaning thanks to the pedagogical method of the project *Senza Zaino* because we are used to reflecting constantly after the activities we undertake (P1).

Furthermore, P5 says:

> I find the concept of metacognition a little hard because, even if it is now widespread at school, I still don't have a clear idea of what it truly means. I am gradually beginning to approach it (P5).

In this regard, the model of the project *Senza Zaino* is strictly based on a metacognitive perspective since teachers start their lesson generally by activating pupils through a problematization phase that makes them enter a discovery dimension. As P4 affirms,

> We never say: '*Today [you shall] open your books at page 15* […]'; quite the opposite, we advance: '*In your opinion, would men have been artists in prehistory? What tools would they have used?*' (P4).

Instead of imparting disciplinary contents, the topic is introduced by asking children some stimulus questions and letting them express their opinions through a brainstorming. Students are at the centre of the learning process and teachers figure out how to act by drawing on the students' feedback: this leads them to implement behaviours related to self-regulation and self-efficacy. P2 confirms:

> All these activities we carry out […] actually contribute to building the metacognitive competence we look for and wish students reach, in order to possess a functional approach to study method (P2).

For this reason, all the participants strongly believe metacognition is a key construct to be developed at a general level, also in daily thinking and acting of teaching staff.

4.2 Multiple preparatory strategies

When introducing children to study processes, the five participating teachers believe it is important to support them by avoiding providing them with a unique and standardized way to study. In contrast, they tend to offer a set of tools and strategies to let them freely choose the ones they prefer and develop a personal approach. It is essential to first work on practices that enable textual comprehension, such as making summary diagrams, underlining words with different colours, or prompting children to create questions based on the readings either in pairs or in groups—and by avoiding those already formulated by the textbook or the teacher. This activity is very functional since, as P4 says, "to draw out the questions, students have to understand the text effectively". Another technique involves incorporating playful dynamics into learning. For example, one of the participants describes using a "historian box," from which teacher retrieves specific objects related to historical events previously studied by pupils and asks the students if anyone knows why these items are in the box. This initiates a discussion where children, taking turns, weare a necklace that bears the inscription "*I am the historian*." Wearing the necklace, they lead the day's history lesson, effectively becoming the protagonists. Concerning this, P4 asserts:

> This makes me realize the learner's level of knowledge and, at the same time, [even if] it turns out to be an oral exam for all intents and purposes, [the] student feels invested with a role and gives all to it, without learning contents by heart since the teacher's demands and attitude are perceived as non-judgemental (P4).

4.3 Critical issues

The development of a study method since primary school is often hindered by rooted and widespread current beliefs, habits, and approaches related to both teachers and pupils. Such challenges can be summarized into four main factors: conceptions of study as (i) an *isolated process*, a (ii) *home(work) assignment*, (iii) a *linear offering* of disciplinary contents, as well as conceptions about (iv) students' *lexical poverty*.

The first factor is a consequence of teachers' common belief according to which study method must be achieved autonomously by the student—that is, in solitude. Otherwise, it is believed she is not making enough efforts. Such belief is reflected in P2's words:

> When you think about study method, it's a very solitary issue that a person has to create for oneself, by at a certain point even wondering why s/he hasn't acquired it yet (P2).

In line with what was highlighted previously, P4 states:

> Children are left to their own devices […], therefore the study of [actual] subjects […] are delegated mainly to parents [as] home assignment (P4).

Indeed, it's usually up to these latter ones to take care of the long and complex research of a study methodology, by making attempts, improvising strategies, and ending up by imparting them passively.

Focusing on teachers' educational practice, participants are generally used to explaining contents in a transmissive manner, by expecting students to remember what they have said. For this purpose, the only way forward by children is to repeat many times the information presented in order to meet the results desired—namely, a passive summary. This is confirmed by P2:

> According to the common logic, I offer a package and you return it to me […] and, based on how similar it is to the one I've given you, I understand whether you have gotten where you needed to […]. It's a close-minded approach […] that doesn't allow personal interpretations and spaces (P2).

In doing so, there is a top-down offering, where learning is focused on a pre-determined product that has to be returned by the student at the end of a certain period. This is a very widespread model yet doesn't pay attention to the process of in-depth analysis and reasoning conducted by pupil.

As a last resort, all the participants notice a growing language poverty among pupils - even within Italian-speaking ones - that makes it difficult to understand the meaning of the words they read, by causing a lack of text comprehension. As a consequence, children aren't able to deduce the heart of the matter to then take possession of the theme, by thinking that "it's easier to learn contents by memory", as P4 points out. "Students' vocabulary is a little limited, therefore also exposition is", P3 continues; indeed, P5 adds:

> In Grade 4 I have found a huge lack of lexicon. They don't know many words and they aren't sometimes even able to produce a sentence, especially written, at an adequate orthographic and syntactic level (P4).

In this regard, P4 believes strongly that certain media contents put the subject into contact with the same and over-simplified words.

4.4 The potential of educational technologies

All the interviewed teachers think educational technologies are a key support to develop a good study method due to the variety of stimuli they offer; indeed, P1 says: "Educational technologies can act positively on study processes since child can benefit from multiple sources and playful tools". To this end, the two primary schools which the participants work in are provided with Acer computers and Chromebooks pupils can use to work individually, in a couple or in group. In doing so, motivation is fostered, knowledge increases, and interdisciplinary connections are developed. In addition, P4 believes that each lesson should always be combined with some computer-based activities. Indeed, this happens constantly in her classroom, where one group at a time faces the topic debated also in a digital way by means of focused educational resources entailing the organisation of the studied information such as *Wordwall*, *Book Creator*, *Kahoot* and *SuperMapsX,* which allows to create multimedia maps. Everyone agrees on the fact that educational technologies haven't to be conceived in place of traditional tools, but as a complement of them. Nevertheless, there is still a lot of training to be done in order to make teachers become aware of their multiple potentials and ready to include them more and more in classroom in an effective way.

4.5 Emerging useful approaches

Despite the critical issues, four possible solutions fostering the development of an efficient and aware study method came to light: *variety of approaches and sources*, *clear goal setting*, attitude towards *experiences and attempts* and practices of *collective construction of knowledge*.

The first one involves the offer from teachers of multiple techniques and tools in order to make children able to test them and choose the ones they prefer to create their own study method. Nevertheless, prior to this, the teacher has to ensure the topic becomes everyone's heritage in the classroom, so that an ongoing exchange of knowledge can take place with a view to a situated and social learning. "If we abandon the model '*I give you and you give me back*,' maybe we get closer to a level which is more played on competence"—P2 affirms.

The second approach focuses on the importance of working on the definition of small but clear and significant goals. On the one hand, teachers' attention should be directed to elements such as pupils' participation, state of mind, level of enjoyment, desire to examine in depth the subject matter, and overall involvement in the activity. This is accomplished by leaving behind the summative assessment since, in such case, the evaluation would bear on the product rather than on the process, without fostering neither improvement nor autonomy. Instead formative assessment is favoured, or even self-assessment. On the other hand, pupils themselves should be equipped with rubrics or checklists "about what '*I got*, *I miss*, *I have to strengthen*'", as proposed by P1 and P2. Another valid solution, especially with younger learners, is the building of a traffic lights system to identify the

abilities achieved (green colour) and those that have not been reached yet (red colour). It is precisely when students produce by themselves feedback or receive it without feeling judged that they truly pass their learning threshold and appropriate the ways to improve it.

The third perspective relies on experience, which is conceived as the starting point of every teaching-learning process. P1 started off: "It would be necessary to have a pupil's holistic view." Indeed, first of all teachers should see students in their different facets and organize classroom work on the interests that are part of the students' everyday life. In line with the above, P1 continues: "If children's education starts from things reflecting their experience, learning will be surely much less demanding". P2 then adds: "Experience also passes through simulations and experiments", by stating that it is from practical attempts and subsequent mistakes that students learn. In light of this, she also specifies: "It's not the topic repetition that gives awareness to it", supporting the possibility to let pupils see things from their own point of view, choose what holds true significance for them, and selecting how to document it. Therefore, corporeal involvement plays a central role since it allows students to touch, measure, photograph or simply construct tools manually—such as timelines or books. "Study method doesn't just fall from the sky, but it is built and developed through very different experiences:" with these words, P2 suggests the importance to arrange a specific pathway, where children gradually collect all assimilated contents and organize them functionally.

The fourth and last proposal concerns the proximity dimension that involves several approaches concerning peer-work such as constructing things together—but which could also performed with a tutor or a teacher. According to this perspective, students' growth and enrichment do not derive either from the study of a written page or from the repetition of a teacher's speech. In contrast, learning is based on collaborative dynamics inside the classroom. Consistently with this, P1 underlines the importance of group activities: "Working together is already a kind of study because you have to understand, share opinions and adopt an inclusive perspective". In addition, it means to "reflect oneself in another one's ideas and abilities" (P2). Indeed, the approach of the project [anonymized for peer-review] establishes that study activities are mainly managed inside the classroom, so that children are not left to their own devices. Another emerging approach is peer tutoring: if we think about an older pupil that comes to help a younger one and takes care of him/her, the learning process will become more authentic and successful. In all this, teachers must act as mediators; in particular, whenever they deal with a new cohort, it is counter-productive to rely on old notebooks or previous tasks. As P4 explains, it is quite the opposite: the key process is to start again from scratch, by putting students in the game according to their own needs, while conducting research and developing experiences within the classroom. Based on such considerations, Bergmann and Sams' (2012) *Flipped Classroom* (FC) methodology is commonly used in the project *Senza Zaino*'s setting, where groups of students select a theme on which they could work autonomously at home and then explain it to their classmates through varied typologies of contents. Concurrently, teacher-centred lesson is abolished. Indeed, teachers take the floor only to provide support, provide final observations, and make a recap. An additional strategy deserving attention is *Reading Aloud* (RA), in which an adult reads a text and the following exchange of ideas fosters the students' processes of metacognition; moreover, RA increases lexical competence, develops the ability to discern the meaning of words in given contexts, and strengthens spoken and argumentative skills.

5. Discussion

Drawing on the data analysis, some elements emerge, which are in line with both previous studies and the latest pedagogical models. Additionally, other elements pave the way for new teaching-learning perspectives to be further explored.

First, as Cornoldi et al. (2015) note, an efficient and aware study method is a key tool for every student to face educational challenges. Arguably, its absence is a source of anxiety and insecurity. Concerning this, primary school plays a meaningful role in making students gradually able to control their own set of strategies, which are functional to optimize time and the quality of their learning (Pelizzoni et al., 2017). Nevertheless, the focus group reveals that the development of a study method is seen by teachers as both an isolated process to be undertaken as a home assignment, delegated to each individual child or, at best, to their parents—that is, two parties that cannot be held fully responsible and do not have the homeschooling tools to support such pedagogical effort.

Study skills prove to be based on three main constructs (Cottini, 2006), such as: metacognition (Flavell, 1976), self-regulation (Zimmerman, 1986) and perception of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1996), which must be developed through targeted actions. On the one hand, their development partially depends on the learner's personal factors (Palmas et al., 2022); on the other hand, it arises largely from the teacher-mediator's critical attitude towards knowledge (Mason, 2000)—namely, by giving effective and prompt feedback, encouraging students to remodel their individual perceptions, and activating motivational changes (Urhahne, 2015). Lack of lexical competence, which is highly widespread among Italian-speaking children as well, is perceived by the five teachers as a factor hindering text comprehension, which pushes pupils to learn contents by heart and limits their ability to present orally. In addition, the linearity of the educational offer envisages study processes in which teachers offer standardized contents and evaluation is based on the ability of students to perform according to expectations. This does not leave room for a more personal and critical attainment of knowledge.

For the purpose of making learners able to re-elaborate and master disciplinary contents, the analysed data underline the teachers' primary role in providing students with a variety of methods and tools, by letting them free to challenge themselves and choose the methods they prefer while studying. This process is facilitated when knowledge is initially shared within

the classroom so that it becomes everyone's heritage; thereafter, pupils will find it simpler to individually take ownership of it through specific study phases and strategies (Andrich, 2015; De Beni and Zamperlin, 1993; Thomas & Robinson, 1977), which they will be free to implement in a spontaneous and autonomous way (De Min Tona et al., 2014). To this end, the five participants stress the importance to both work on the definition of small but clear and meaningful objectives and to promote formative assessment or—even better—self-assessment, by encouraging students to create school rubrics or checklists that would enhance their *thinking about thinking* processes (Lai, 2011).

The focus group has also brought to light the teachers' common ideal that the awareness of a specific topic does not result from its continuous repetition. In contrast, it is important to start from experience, by adopting the pupils' holistic view and making them accustomed to problematization—in line with Cornoldi's (1995) reflection—as well as to collective construction of knowledge. Involving the latter interaction and approach to others' ideas and abilities, it can be supported by working with a peer, a tutor, or a teacher—who shall not be required to impart contents from above. Moreover, the process could be supported by implementing educational technologies in an effective fashion. Indeed, as literature confirms, TELEs—if used in a technological-educational perspective—foster self-regulative and cooperative-metacognitive attitudes, while improving and innovating teaching-learning dynamics at the same time (Bottino, 2015; Persico & Steffens, 2017; Ranieri, 2022). The aforementioned aspects, which have emerged from the focus group, reiterate the urgency to enhance *learn to learn* processes (Haywood, 2010) in the educational landscape.

6. Limitations of the study

Given the low number of participants and the purposive nature of recruitment the sample cannot be considered as representative (Jahoda & Cook, 1952). Therefore, results obtained cannot be generalized to other contexts despite providing useful indicators to reflect upon the issue under investigation, possibly to refine and expand prospective research (Bocci et al., 2020). Future developments shall entail the collection of additional empirical material—e.g., by involving teachers working in different schools and by giving voice to the learners' perceptions and opinions.

7. Conclusions

This paper presented the results of a focus group consisting of five primary school teachers to collect their views on the importance of practicing good study skills since primary school, in an attempt to bring to light to both hypothetical enabling and hindering factors. Findings confirm that such issue is the responsibility of both teachers and students (Cornoldi, 1995) and could be improved through several meaningful experiences—starting from the very beginning of every child's educational career. That is achieved by focusing especially on metacognitive attitudes (Flavell, 1976), which in turn lead to individual self-regulation (Zimmerman, 1986) and individual perception of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1996). In particular, the study shows the need to work on rooted and common current beliefs, habits and approaches while, at the same time, fostering greater awareness in teaching staff concerning central subject matters such as metacognition and educational technologies, which support the development of study processes. The reliability of results and their interpretation is increased by the choice to contribute to this long-debated issue by developing a bottom-up argument—that is, a reasoning that is grounded on the direct involvement of teachers, who walk the field, and build on their perceptions, feelings, and experiences (Bocci et al., 2020).

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