

2. Scuole Dada



Classroom of the Istituto Comprensivo 3 di Modena (IC Modena 3) school, member of the Scuole Dada network

The Scuole Dada (Didattica per Ambienti di Apprendimento) is a new educational model conceived by a grassroots network of teachers and headteachers to transform classrooms into laboratories for specific subjects, through technology, furniture and other tools. Scuole Dada has attracted support from other school leaders²⁷ and now has 30 schools across Italy that are experimenting with the model.

Context

Using technology and other tools to transform the spatial and physical learning environment of a classroom is particularly innovative in Italy's schools system. In the majority of Italian schools, students are divided in classes and assigned to specific rooms. Instead of students moving from classroom to classroom (as it is common in many school systems), teachers move from classroom to classroom. This means classrooms are rarely equipped with subject-specific tools to support digital learning, and few Italian schools are able to alter and innovate the physical learning environment.

How it works

Scuole Dada is a whole-school approach to changing the physical learning environment to enable teachers to adopt new teaching methods. The Scuole Dada model is driven by teachers and headteachers from the bottom up, rather than by a central government directive from the top-down. This has advantages - teachers and schools have a strong sense of buy-in to the project, are committed to a single vision for their school, and relationships between school members are strong. However, there are challenges too. Implementation of the Scuole Dada model has profound implications for the day-to-day running of a school and is, initially at least, highly disruptive. Led by the headteacher, each school:

1. Converts classrooms into 'laboratories', equipping them with technological tools selected by teachers and students depending on the subject taught.
2. Support teachers to manage the new tools and feel confident to adapt their practice to a new environment.

Space for building teachers' and students confidence

The model creates dedicated spaces for subject departments. This enables teachers to customise their teaching activities to a learning environment over which they have much more control. For example, teachers have opened their classrooms to inspiring people from their local area, built subject specific libraries in their classroom, and experimented with the use of technology specific to their needs or subject areas. As Daniele Barca (Headteacher of the Istituto Comprensivo 3 di Modena) observes, "Dada gives teachers more time and confidence to manage the innovation of their role through new spatial organisations and dedicated technologies."

The Dada model aims to include students in its own implementation, providing opportunities for further skill development and buy-in from the school community. From painting classrooms or developing apps to manage school communication, students are intimately involved in the process of change. Research²⁸ conducted by Università degli Studi di Roma "La Sapienza" indicates that nurturing the school community (that have embarked on the Dada model) has been a key factor in its success²⁹.



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A closer look on the ground:

Liceo Scientifico John Fitzgerald Kennedy, Rome

The Liceo Scientifico Kennedy in Rome, with 80 teachers and 870 students, was the first school to experiment with the Dada School model in 2014. A commission and a research group was formed on a voluntary basis by teachers to plan the different phases of implementation. Lydia Cangemi, Headteacher of Liceo Scientifico Kennedy, emphasised the importance of going slowly to allow school staff and parents to adjust to new ways of working that were outside of their comfort zone. However, a certain level of confidence was required to take the first step. She added, "Courage is an essential attitude to implement these kinds of projects, if you stop at the first bureaucratic obstacle you can hardly experiment, for school leaders there is always a risk to take".

Involvement of the whole teaching staff and wider community was essential from the outset. The transformation of the physical infrastructure of the building was possible thanks to public funding, but also to the voluntary contribution of resources in-kind, offered by teachers and student family members. For example, parents with architecture qualifications advised on spatial planning while lawyers assisted with administrative and regulation concerns.

The spatial transformation made possible a range of technological transformation. For example, an electronic register was introduced in the first year alongside digitisation of a number of other administrative functions. Teacher training was introduced to help the staff make better use of the technology provided in each of the classrooms thanks to the programme investments (such as interactive whiteboards enabling the use of specific classroom teaching applications, design software, word processing or calculation, video and films, music, radio and television, email, access to Internet and the educational network of the institute, videoconferences).

An evaluation framework has been developed in collaboration with the Faculty of Psychology and Pedagogy of the Rome Sapienza University³⁰. The goal of this evaluation is to learn how the reorganisation of school spaces is impacting on students' learning. This evaluation and monitoring has been useful to the school's staff to understand what has been working, and make changes in practice. Since transforming into a Scuole Dada school, the school has registered an increase in enrolment requests up to its maximum capacity.