VIOLENCE, ALGORITHMS, AND SCHOOL: A QUASI-EXPERIMENTAL INVESTIGATION INTO THE EFFECTIVENESS OF DIGITAL AFFECTIVE LITERACY IN MIDDLE SCHOOL

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ABSTRACT

Introduction. Adolescents' identity-building processes and the resulting relational dynamics are currently strongly influenced by the growing pervasiveness of digital environments and their associated algorithmic content profiling mechanisms. The dynamics of the outrage economy, digital narcissism, and the spectacularization of violence on social media permeate an ecosystem in which the lack of emotional literacy produces deviant outcomes, including forms of school aggression mediated by the use of technology. This paper analyzes the importance of digital emotional literacy as a pedagogical tool capable of countering violent phenomena in the school context.Method. The research method used for this study is a quasi-experimental design, lasting 12 weeks. An experimental group (GS) composed of 48 students and a control group (GC) composed of 47 students were identified, all from a secondary school in the province of Naples (Campania), in the 2025/2026 school year. The instruments used were: a) Bandura's Moral Disengagement Scale (MDS-B; Bandura et al., 1996, Italian adaptation Caprara et al., 2006); b) the Hate Speech Recognition Scale (HSRS; Fasoli et al., 2018); c) a teacher-administered observation sheet of classroom conflict episodes.Results. The GS highlighted a reduction in scores regarding the value of moral disengagement (Cohen's d = 0.61, $p < 0.01$) and an increase in the ability to recognize and deconstruct online hate speech (d = 0.54, $p < 0.05$). Observed conflict episodes decreased by 31% in the GS compared to the GC.Discussion. The limitations of this study are due to the non-generalizability of the sample, the porous nature of the school context, and the persistent asymmetry between the power of commercial algorithms and the resources of the educational institution. The results only partially support the hypothesis of the effectiveness of the program, which leads to the conclusion that affective digital literacy cannot be conceived as a panacea, but represents a necessary, though unfortunately not yet sufficient, condition for citizenship education in the algorithmic age.

KEYWORDS

Digital affective literacy; school violence; hate speech.

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1. Introduction

Incidents of school aggression, accompanied by the systematic video recording of assaults on teachers for dissemination on social media, have marked the Italian news in recent years. Such episodes do not lend themselves to a mono-causal reading, and reducing them to simple family failures, individual pathologies, or disciplinary deficiencies means misunderstanding the social and technical structure that produces and amplifies them (Bauman, 2011; Selwyn, 2013).

The present work aims to analyze and offer a response to these phenomena that is neither repression nor technological optimism, but rather constructs a critical and epistemologically grounded posture toward the issue of affective literacy in the era of algorithms. The focus lies in the structuring of the affective and moral dispositions that govern the way the subject inhabits the digital space, distinguishing between literacy of tools and literacy of the digital self (Rivoltella, 2020).

The underlying thesis is that contemporary school violence does not represent a simple return to the state of nature, but a cultural product of a specific architecture of digitized communication. Floridi (2017) introduces the concept of onlife, eliminating the rigid dichotomy between online and offline: the digital ecosystem does not represent a place separate from reality where one goes, but is rather the environmental condition in which contemporary existence unfolds. Therefore, the violent act that is filmed and shared live is not the product of a (sick) mind using a neutral tool, but represents a performative act

structured according to the grammar of algorithmic engagement, which rewards emotional intensity, polarization, and shock.

The tool as such does not produce the violence, but creates the conditions of expression, amplification, and validation for subjects characterized by fragility and emotional dysregulation. This framework requires a response from educational institutions that does not trivially blame the tool (consider actions such as smartphone confiscation or institutional firewalls), but implements educational procedures capable of building subjects who are able to read the algorithm (to avoid being read) and to recognize the other as an irreducible presence even through the screen. The present study aims to answer the following research question: does a structured path of digital affective literacy, conducted in an ordinary school context according to the principles of critical pedagogy and the ethics of care, produce a measurable reduction in moral disengagement and a greater capacity to recognize online hate speech in upper secondary school students?

The operational hypotheses are as follows:

H1. Participants in the digital affective literacy path (EG) will show, after 12 weeks, significantly lower scores on the Moral Disengagement Scale compared to the control group (CG).

H2. The EG will show a significant increase in the capacity to recognize and deconstruct online hate speech compared to the CG.

H3. The EG will demonstrate a reduction in the episodes of conflict observed in the classroom compared to the CG, measured through the teacher detection form.

The research hypotheses were formalized following the administration of the pre-test (T0) and before the collection of the post-test data (T1), guaranteeing the blindness of the researchers with respect to the final outcomes of the intervention.

2. Theoretical framework: Convergences and tensions in the literature

2.1 Moral disengagement in the algorithmic era

The moral disengagement of Albert Bandura (2014, 2017) represents the theoretical contribution of greatest relevance for interpreting digital-mediated school violence. Bandura identifies anonymity or physical distance between the aggressor and the victim as facilitating factors for moral disengagement, aspects that represent normality in digital communication. Furthermore, the author defines the mechanisms through which individuals disconnect their morals from the action: moral justification, euphemistic labeling, advantageous comparison, displacement and diffusion of responsibility, and dehumanization of the victim; aspects that find an ideal breeding ground in digital environments, structurally predisposed to their enhancement. Suler (2004), in his seminal study, introduces the concept of the online disinhibition effect, which combines with the logic of the outrage economy described by Zuboff (2019): the economic structure of capitalist surveillance platforms maximizes profit through the maximization of engagement, which reaches its peak when the activated emotions (anger, outrage, fear, contempt) are intense and polarizing. Therefore, it is probable that an adolescent, exposed daily to such conditions, develops a lower level of empathy toward the sufferings of others, as an effect of an ecological conditioning capable of normalizing verbal and visual violence (understood as a standard format of interaction).

Perrone and Sommantico (2025), in a study on a sample of 311 Italian young adults, demonstrated that the Fear of Missing Out (FoMO) constitutes the strongest predictor of both grandiose and vulnerable narcissism, while problematic smartphone use configures as a significant predictor of both dimensions. From a pedagogical point of view, these data suggest that the response to digital violence cannot ignore the narcissistic substrate that social environments contribute to fueling. However, it is worth noting that correlation does not imply causality, and the risk is to "pathologize" behaviors that are also expressions of a legitimate need for identity and existential recognition within the peer group.

2.2 Phenomenological pedagogy and the "deficit of intentionality"

Piero Bertolini (1988, 2003) states that the educational event is always situated in the encounter with the vision of the world of the subject in formation. Violence is never an act devoid of meaning, but represents the expression of a distorted way of seeing. Therefore, the student who acts violently (and who spectacularizes the outcome online) sees the teacher as an obstacle to their own self, the classmate as a threat or a mere transitional object to be used to obtain visibility (likes), and the school as a prison devoid of meaningful bonds. Bertolini states that the response to such a posture, before being coercive, must be interpretive, and therefore oriented to understanding the intentional structure of that act. This vision finds correspondence with the concept of youth nihilism by Galimberti (2007), according to which the aggressiveness of young people does not spring from pre-established delinquent drives, but from a condition of emotional illiteracy due to which they are not in possession of useful tools to recognize and process their own distress. The absence of an emotional grammar causes the distress to translate immediately into

psychomotor action and direct violence. Emotional illiteracy represents, therefore, the base condition that the digital ecosystem exasperates through algorithmic speed, content fragmentation, and immediacy of response, making contemporary school violence sudden and disproportionate. Recalcati (2014) has shown how the crisis of the symbolic authority of the teacher makes the school incapable of acting as a barrier against destructive impulses. The teacher who is filmed while being assaulted is not the victim of the single student, but of a disintermediated system in which the educational institution struggles to assert the educational value of the limit and of the frustration of the "No." Therefore, it becomes fundamental to promote a pedagogy of care and affectivity (Mortari, 2015) that rehabilitates the school space as a place of authentic co-construction of meanings.

2.3 The ethics of care and the pedagogy of the limit

Luigina Mortari defines care not as a sentimental disposition, but as an ontologically grounded practice that recognizes in the other a "being-in-need-of-good" (2006, 2015). This perspective shows how the educational task consists in creating the conditions so that the subject can learn to recognize the other in their irreducible alterity, even when dealing with a digital profile or an image on the screen. The contribution of Mortari is in agreement with what was established by Noddings (1984), according to whom moral education cannot be separated from the experience of care received. In an ecosystem in which digital relationships tend to be asymmetrical, instrumental, and disempowered in their empathetic dimension, as documented by Perrone (2021) in the analysis of the interconnections between online anonymity and dehumanization of the victim, the deficit of care risks becoming structural. What has been said highlights the necessity to restore the limit as a positive

educational category. Mellace (2026), in a recent contribution on the ambivalences of life online, highlighted how the digital ecosystem, built on the principle of infinite scrolling and unlimited engagement, systematically denies the reflective pause that is a condition of possibility for moral judgment. The subject formed exclusively in this environment develops what could be called anesthesia of the limit: an inability to tolerate frustration, rejection, and symbolic mediation.

2.4 Critical points in the debate: what the literature does not say

The literature on digital literacy and school violence presents some systematic gaps that it is dutiful to point out. In the first place, there is a tendency to treat the teacher as a neutral mediator of change, ignoring that the teacher themselves is a subject immersed in the same digital ecosystem, with the same vulnerabilities and the same perceptual distortions as their students. Therefore, one cannot separate the emotional training of teachers as a prerequisite for any intervention. In the second place, many studies, including that of Perrone and Sommantico (2025), stop at the detection of correlations without addressing the structural dimension of the problem. Selwyn (2021) and Buckingham (2019) have rigorously argued that media education risks becoming a futile effort if it is not accompanied by a political dimension of algorithm regulation.

In the third place, the socioeconomic component is systematically underrepresented. Families with fewer cultural and material resources offer their children less mediated and more exposed digital environments. Digital violence has a correlation with social marginality (Donati, 2011). Ignoring it means producing interventions that work primarily for those who need them least.

3. Job Description

3.1 Participants and setting

The study was conducted in a technical-vocational institute in the province of Naples, selected through convenience sampling after contact with the school leadership and obtaining the clearance from the Board of Governors. The school presents a student intake characterized by a medium-low family socioeconomic level (school average ESCS indicator: -0.48, compared to the national average of 0.00 for this type of institute), a relevant datum for the purpose of interpreting the results. A total of 99 students from the third and fourth years of upper secondary school participated in the study (mean age M = 16.4 years, SD = 0.87; 52% male), distributed across four classes. The classes were assigned to the experimental condition (n = 50, two classes) and control condition (n = 49, two classes) by means of a draw, after verifying the comparability of the groups on pre-test scores. Cluster assignment at the class level was chosen for practical reasons and to avoid inter-group contamination, which is common in school designs. Inclusion criteria required: regular enrollment in the current school year, presence at least at 80% of the intervention sessions, and signing of the informed consent by parents or legal guardians (or by the student themselves for adult students). Four participants were excluded from the final study (2 due to school dropout, 2 due to lack of consent), bringing the final sample to 95 students (EG: n = 48; CG: n = 47).

It must be emphasized with the necessary transparency that the sample is not representative of the Italian school population: the results are not automatically generalizable to contexts with a different socioeconomic profile, type of institute, or geographical region.

3.2 The intervention program

The digital affective literacy program, internally named "Beyond the Screen," was designed on the basis of three foundational pedagogical principles (see Table 1).

Tab. 1. Pedagogical foundational principles of the digital affective literacy program

Principle	Description
Incarnation (Bertolini, 1988)	Digital is not a dimension separate from bodily and relational experience, and any educational path must constantly translate the virtual plane into relational experience.
Ethics of Care (Mortari, 2015)	Every digital act produces real consequences on real people; the individual's responsibility is not suspended when acting behind a screen.
Critical Resistance (Cambi, 2004; Freire, 1970/2020):	Education does not transmit neutral content, but rather develops the ability to critically read the world, including the algorithmic world, which allows the subject not to be passively shaped by it.

The program's goal is certainly not to demonize social media, nor to induce a rejection of digital tools in young people. Rather, it aims to develop what Rivoltella (2016) called pragmatic media competence: the ability to use them with reflective intentionality, understanding the mechanisms that structure the experience they produce.

3.3 Program Structure

The program is divided into 12 weekly sessions of 100 minutes each (2 curricular hours), conducted during Civic Education and Italian classes, in consultation with the tenured teachers. The program's staff includes two

pedagogy researchers and a tenured teacher specifically trained in weekly supervision meetings. The intervention is structured into three sequential modules (Table 2).

Tab. 2. Structure of the intervention program in three modules

	Module 1	Module 2	Module 3
Title	Anatomy of the algorithm	The other's body	From reaction to response
Duration	sessions 1-4	sessions 5-8	sessions 9-12
Objective	Cognitive: Understanding recommendation and profiling mechanisms.	Affective: recovering the empathic dimension in mediated communication.	Ethical-behavioral: de-automating impulsive responses online.
Description of central activities	Reverse engineering viral content; outrage concept maps economy; use of social media transparency tools. Making algorithmic non-neutrality visible.	Digital role-playing (chat vs. face-to-face); deconstructing hate speech using the HSRS methodology. Theoretical focus on mirror neurons and emotional anesthesia (Stockdale et al., 2015; Terry & Cain, 2016).	Reflective pause techniques (the "5-word rule before sending"); simulations of non-reactive responses to hate attacks; co-designing a "digital class pact."

The control group followed normal curricular activities without additional interventions on the topic of digital literacy. Communication with families did not explicit the experimental distinction in order to avoid demand bias.

3.4 Measurement instruments

The measurement took place at two times: T0 (pre-intervention, week -1) and T1 (post-intervention, week 13). Moral Disengagement Scale (MDS-B). The scale by Bandura et al. (1996), adapted and validated in Italian by Caprara et al. (2006), consists of 32 items on a 3-point Likert scale, organized into 8 subscales corresponding to the mechanisms of moral disengagement (moral justification, euphemistic labeling, advantageous comparison, displacement of responsibility, diffusion of responsibility, distortion of consequences, attribution of blame, dehumanization). Cronbach's alpha in the present sample resulted in $\alpha = .87$. Hate Speech Recognition Scale (HSRS). The scale by Fasoli et al. (2018) assesses the capacity for recognition of and the affective distance from hate speech in 20 items on a 5-point Likert scale. Compared to the prevailing instruments in the literature, the HSRS distinguishes between cognitive recognition (knowing how to identify hate speech) and affective distance (feeling discomfort with respect to it). In the sample, an $\alpha = .81$ was recorded for the cognitive subscale and $\alpha = .78$ for the affective one.

Conflict Episode Detection Form (SEC). A structured observational instrument, filled out weekly by the class teachers. It records the number and typology of conflict episodes (mild verbal, severe verbal, physical, involving a digital device). Inter-rater agreement between two teachers per class was verified on a sub-sample of 3 weeks (Cohen's $k = .74$, substantial agreement).

3.5 Statistical analysis

The analyses were conducted using the R software (version 4.4.1). Given the hierarchical structure of the sample (students nested within classes) and the consequent risk of violating the assumption of independence of observations, the modeling strategy was calibrated based on the number of available macro-units. To guarantee methodological robustness in line with international

standards, a General Linear Model with Fixed Effects (ANCOVA approach) was applied to the scores detected at the post-test (T1). Specifically, the scores of each dependent variable at T1 were regressed on the Condition (Experimental Group vs. Control Group), entering the respective score at the pre-test (T0) as a continuous covariate, in order to statistically control for individual differences at baseline, and the variable "Class" as a fixed control factor (dummy coding). The assumption of homoscedasticity and the normality of residuals were verified through the Breusch-Pagan test and visual inspection of Q-Q plots; for variables showing markedly skewed distributions, a logarithmic transformation was performed. The effect size is expressed via Cohen's d (calculated from the conditional means adjusted by the model) and partial eta squared (η2p). The statistical significance level for all tests was set at $p < .05$, applying the Bonferroni correction for multiple comparisons.

4. Results

4.1 Equivalency of the groups at the pre-test

The two groups showed themselves to be comparable at the pre-test across all dependent variables:

MDS-B: EG M = 42.3, SD = 7.1; CG M = 43.1, SD = 6.8; $t(93) = -0.57$, $p = .57$.

HSRS-cognitive: EG M = 28.4, SD = 5.2; CG M = 29.0, SD = 5.6; $t(93) = -0.54$, $p = .59$.

No significant differences emerged for sex, age, and level of social media use (measured with the SAS-SV, De Pasquale et al., 2017).

4.2 Effects of the intervention at the post-test (T1)

The linear fixed-effects models, gross of the baseline (T0) and the clustering effect of the class, revealed a significant and robust impact of the condition on post-test scores for the total MDS-B variables ($b = -6.84$, $SE = 1.92$, $t = -3.56$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.61$) and HSRS-cognitive ($b = 4.21$, $SE = 1.48$, $t = 2.84$, $p < .01$, $d = 0.54$). For the HSRS-affective, the interaction turned out to be marginally significant ($b = 2.37$, $SE = 1.33$, $t = 1.78$, $p = .08$, $d = 0.38$), suggesting that change in the emotional dimension of hate recognition requires longer times compared to cognitive restructuring, in line with the studies by Santerini (2017). Analyzing the subscales of the MDS-B, the most marked reductions in the EG compared to the CG are recorded for dehumanization of the victim ($d = 0.71$, $p < .001$) and diffusion of responsibility ($d = 0.63$, $p < .01$), both subscales with specific relevance for online aggressive behaviors. This pattern is coherent with the focus of the intervention program on Module 2 (the body of the other) and suggests that interventions focused on embodiment and on the recovery of the empathetic dimension have a selective effect on the mechanisms of moral disengagement most involved in digital-mediated aggressive behaviors. Regarding the SEC, the conflict episodes detected by teachers in the classes of the EG were reduced by 31% between T0 and T1 (from $M = 4.7$ to $M = 3.2$ episodes/week), against a reduction of 9% in the CG (from $M = 4.4$ to $M = 4.0$). From a methodological point of view, since this is a detection conducted by teachers embedded within the class council, the datum should not be understood as an aseptic and purely behavioral measurement, but rather as an indicator of the perceived relational climate and of the evaluative posture of the teaching staff. Although the high inter-judge agreement ($k = .74$) attests to the internal stability of the observational form, mitigating the risk of subjective drift, the partial awareness of the aims of the intervention by the teachers in the EG might have generated a latent effect of demand characteristics. However, the transformation of the teacher's gaze, which becomes reflective

and more prone to catching conflictual micro-dynamics to deconstruct them rather than to sanction them, does not configure as a mere experimental bias, but rather as a systemic transformative outcome co-essential to ordinary school intervention.

5. Discussion

The results support hypotheses H1 and H2: the program produced significant reductions in moral disengagement and improvements in the cognitive capacity to recognize hate speech. These results suggest that structured, theoretically grounded interventions conducted by trained staff can modify moral dispositions that are considered stable. The effect sizes (d = 0.54-0.71) place within the medium-high range for intervention research in a school context, exceeding in terms of efficacy the traditional benchmarks of standardized SEL programs (Durlak et al., 2011), allowing to state that digital affective literacy, designed in this way, produces measurable effects in the short term. At the same time, it is not possible to state that such effects are permanent, generalizable, or sufficient to modify aggressive behavior at its structural roots. It is worth noting that these results cannot be considered a solution to the problem of digital school violence since this work presents precise limitations: The first is traceable to the small number of involved classes. Although the adoption of a fixed-effects statistical model with baseline control (ANCOVA) allowed to mathematically neutralize the clustering bias without incurring the instability typical of mixed models on small samples, the limited structural variability recommends caution and circumscribes the internal validity of the results. The second is the non-probabilistic sample, which prevents generalization. The third is the problem of transferability: what works in a structured intervention context, with dedicated staff, weekly supervision, and institutional motivation, has very different effects from what can be

implemented in the ordinary routine by already overburdened teachers, without additional resources and in classes with high conflictuality. The most relevant issue that the data cannot resolve is, surely, that of the asymmetry of power between the school institution and digital platforms. Selwyn (2021) states that educating young people to resist algorithmic manipulation is a noble but structurally unequal undertaking. In this specific case, the work provided for 12 sessions of 100 minutes in a year, which represent nothing if compared to 4–6 daily hours of exposure to recommendation systems designed to maximize time on the device. Therefore, the issue is not technical but ethical and political (Floridi, 2017). The governance of algorithms requires regulatory intervention, and the Digital Services Act surely represents a first step, as confirmed by Mellace (2026), but perhaps still insufficient because it lacks rigorous application. The risk is that attention is focused on individual responsibility and education only to blame individuals so as to "dump" and "hide" the weight of structural problems, exonerating platforms and governments from their responsibilities. It is not being stated that school intervention is useless, but that, without teamwork, it is rendered partial. The school represents the necessary place to address these issues, but alone it is not sufficient to build real digital citizenship. The response to digital and non-digital violence requires a constellation of interventions that includes the school classroom, the system of family relationships, social services policy, and platform regulation (Novara, 2011; Donati, 2006).

6. Conclusion

Digital-mediated school violence is not a technical problem requiring technical solutions, nor a moral problem requiring more severe sanctions. It is a pedagogical problem that, necessarily, calls into question the deep structure of the educational relationship, especially in an era in which the border between

school and the attention market has become porous. The present study shows that theoretically grounded and methodologically rigorous interventions can produce significant effects on dimensions such as moral disengagement and the recognition of hate speech. At the same time, the research flags its own limitations and inscribes itself within a wider horizon in which education is a necessary but not sufficient condition.

The theoretical and practical challenge for pedagogy in the coming years is to build a paradigm of digital affective literacy that is at the same time epistemologically robust, empirically verifiable, culturally sensitive, and politically aware of its own partiality. Violence is fought with multiple interventions, not just with good classroom practices.

Future studies should:

a) replicate the design on larger and geographically diversified samples;

b) include longitudinal follow-up measures;

c) investigate the emotional training of teachers as a moderating variable;

d) develop outcome measures that capture not only individual change, but also that of the classroom climate as a relational system.

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