

## CHANGES CAUSED BY THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN THE EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

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**Abstract:** *The pandemic had the power to change everything around, but most of all it left its mark on school, education and the education system. Some studies show that this period has created gaps that can never be filled, others see an opportunity to reimagine and revitalize education, in all its forms. Clearly, even in the best of normal times, training children is a far more complex goal than getting them into a classroom. Therefore, the purpose of the article is to find an answer to the question "Is the impact of the change caused by the COVID-19 pandemic in the educational environment positive?"*

**Key words:** *change, school environment, digitization, pandemic.*

**JEL classification:** *M15, O15.*

### 1. Introduction

Schools and universities have an important role in the development of young people, but also in maintaining a mental balance for them. In addition to providing them with stability, routine and a certain consistency, educational institutions are for young people an important part of the interaction they need.

At the beginning of the pandemic period, the education system was forced to adapt, to turn its attention to investment in technology, resources and training of education providers. These aspects were necessary so that, in turn, the direct beneficiaries of education obtain optimal learning conditions.

The most effective tool for engaging students in teaching activities and maintaining access to learning was online courses. But on the other hand, lack of access to technology or fast and reliable internet access prevented students from rural areas and disadvantaged families from benefiting from the same conditions.

Thus, the pandemic influenced the quality of education, bringing negative effects on it and affecting the interaction between teachers and students. In addition to this aspect, through online courses, a decrease in the quality of information and the degree of interest that students give to the lessons has been observed.

Due to the fact that they are not stimulated by new teaching and learning techniques, children prefer to study teaching materials individually. Moreover, a need identified among the students was that of accessing new courses from the professional or personal sphere, which in turn satisfy the need to deepen the materials presented during the classes. The pandemic has also brought negative effects on interpersonal relationships, in that students no longer have the context to work and collaborate as a team to develop a task.

Regarding the mental health of students, changes in education have brought negative effects on it. A recent study by YoungMinds in June 2020 showed that 74% of teachers and staff in educational institutions agreed that the closure of schools and universities had a negative impact on the mental health of young people. At the same time, for many young people, not having access to resources and materials with which to learn, there is a subsequent negative effect on both their academic achievement and their well-being.

On the other hand, we can conclude that education during the pandemic has registered a decrease also due to the fact that no measures were taken regarding technological investments for students, not ensuring the proper functioning of the way of learning and assimilating information.

The impact of the pandemic is deeply felt by education systems. The rapid need for digitalization, the challenges related to the creation of a new curriculum adapted to online

teaching, the negative psychosocial impact felt by young people, generated by isolation, anxiety, insecurity, but especially the increase in the school dropout rate caused by the lack of access to online learning tools, are a few of the realities faced by the educational system at the global level.

The COVID-19 pandemic has determined a series of implications with a strong impact on the economic and social life of the population. As a result of the rapid spread of the pandemic, the authorities have taken several measures to prevent and reduce the incidence of infections, including distancing and physical isolation measures. These interventions had a profound impact on the psycho-emotional balance of the members of the entire society. Physical interaction has been shown to be closely related to population well-being, health and social opportunities.

Global studies on the impact of the pandemic show that young people are among the most affected population groups. They had to adapt to dramatic changes in education or the labor market, daily routine and family life. Some have had setbacks, depression or other traumatic experiences during the period of isolation, while groups that were marginalized or disadvantaged until the pandemic are now at increased risk of becoming even more isolated.

## **2. The impact of the pandemic on school organizations**

The imposition of the state of emergency in mid-March 2020 and the closing of schools brought with it important changes in everyone's routine, the students being in turn affected by the limitations generated by the new circumstances. In this context, marked by movement and interaction restrictions, communication with others and leisure time needed adjustments.

In the case of teachers, the most affected people are older teachers, many of whom are not familiar with the use of smartphones or computers. A very big problem that both students and teachers encounter during the pandemic is that they had to change their learning/teaching methodology by 180°. The most affected category of students is that of teenagers from rural areas because many of them, for various reasons, do not have access to the Internet, smart phones or computers. These elements caused both a feeling of exclusion among students and teachers, but above all a feeling of helplessness.

Parents who do not have the opportunity to provide their children with the technological support they need to attend classes are in the same situation. In order to help students who do not have access to the Internet, many teachers have chosen the option of empowering other students with the task of forwarding the material to their colleagues or of sending the material by mail in physical format.

In this situation, a good collaboration between students, teachers and parents is necessary to be able to make the learning process as efficient as possible. As for the limits of online education, a survey in this regard highlighted six major shortcomings of it: the relaxation of pupils / students, due to the education carried out at home; weak / unstable internet connection; poor provision of the necessary devices for conducting online education; the poor training of some teachers in the use of devices and online platforms; the large number of pupils/students with whom a teacher carries out his activity, respectively the loss of interest of the teaching staff in ensuring a quality education.

The didactic activity until the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic had the aspect known to all the factors involved in the instructional-educational process: students, parents, teachers.

The change that has occurred has brought with it many challenges at all levels of society, but in the case of education they have a much more severe impact and on a much longer term. The direct interaction between student and teacher, an essential factor in the educational process, suffered enormously in this context. This change was felt by many

teachers, which came as a challenge that I had to face, an adaptation on the fly, undirected, uncoordinated without much detail from anyone.

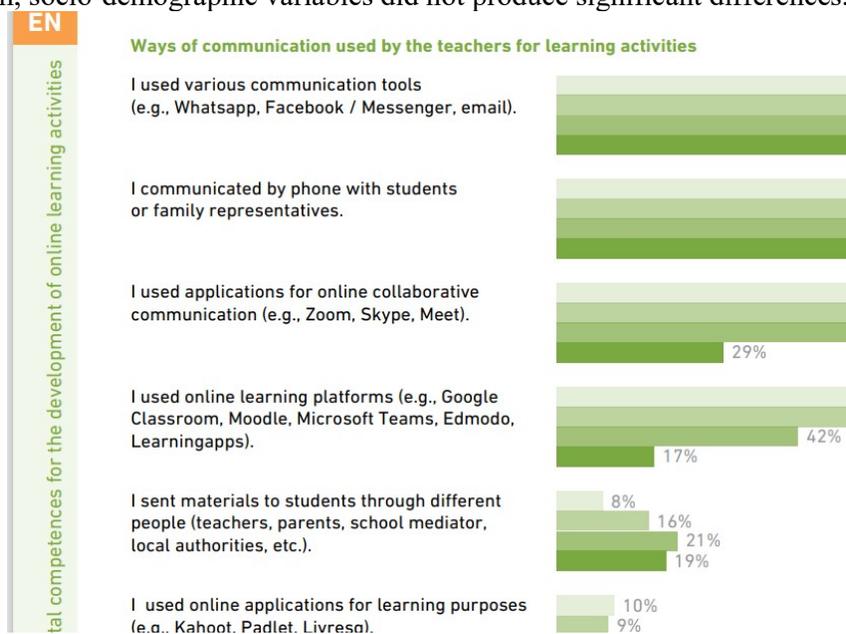
As a teacher and as a director, they had to deal with this situation, trying to be present for both the students and their parents, trying to clarify as much as could be clarified at that time, any aspect related to online learning.

If in the case of professional life things had a difficult evolution, but it still happened after watching dozens of tutorials on the use of educational platforms, online training courses, online evaluation methods and techniques, online teaching, etc. in the case of personal life the challenge of working from home was, I think, the ultimate challenge.

When the family members work from home, the kindergarten is done online, at the same time as online classes at school, adding to them the efficient management of household activities, everything turns into a permanent challenge that must, somehow, to face it. It is also observable from the interaction with the students during this period of the pandemic, the changes made at the level of communication, of socialization, between and with the students, an aspect that is difficult to fix in the near future, the impact is even greater in the case of children who have not had the possibility of participating in online classes, where the gaps are obvious and difficult to recover.

### 3. Digital skills for conducting online learning activities

According to the research study "Distance school during the covid-19 pandemic" in terms of students' digital skills, necessary to participate in online lessons and activities, over two thirds of students managed on their own, and a quarter needed helpful only at the beginning. Only 5% of student respondents frequently needed help using apps or devices, and among them, socio-demographic variables did not produce significant differences.



**Chart 1. Ways of communication used by teachers for learning activities**

Source: ȘCOALA LA DISTANȚĂ ÎN PERIOADA PANDEMIEI COVID-19, [Microsoft Word - Rezumat ancheta Scoala la distanta.docx \(ise.ro\)](#)

It can be seen that 40% of teachers report that they have not used applications for collaborative communication during homeschooling, while only 10% have used applications in learning activities with students (e.g. Geogebra, Kahoot, Padlet, Livresq, Socrative, Menti, Canva, etc.). About 25% of teachers declare that they do not have enough experience in

working with different online tools and applications, with a similar share of teachers who declared that they experienced professional discomfort in interacting with students in contexts.

The analysis of the research data indicates that the main skills that need to be developed relate to: designing / adapting activities for the online environment and structuring online learning activities (the balance between synchronous / asynchronous); identification/use/development of educational resources, including open educational resources (EORs); working on learning platforms; the use of digital tools in formulating feedback/evaluation; activating, stimulating students' motivation and autonomy in participating in online activities.

Although students rarely reported difficulties related to digital skills in participating in online activities, over a third of teachers believe that some students in the classes they worked with online did not demonstrate sufficiently developed digital skills to allow them to use different tools and applications - especially in rural areas and at primary and pre-school levels.

Major deficiencies of online education in Romania:

1. Lack of protocols. The teachers benefited from an extremely permissive approach, given that there was no coherent approach from the authorities regarding online education and minimal training: in the first phase, they could choose whether or not to hold classes, and the program was reduced to a minimum (1-2 hours in the primary cycle), just to justify the salary he received. This was the basis of the educational deficiencies of students accumulated during the COVID-19 pandemic;

2. Insufficient training of teachers and the platforms used for online education. Most teachers no longer taught online, there was no unitary platform approved by the Ministry, everyone adapted as they could (and if they could!), at the beginning there were no minimum courses for teachers to acquire the skills basic for the use of IT platforms;

3. The infrastructure and access to the Internet for teachers and students, aspects we discussed before.

#### **4. Conclusions**

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on education tends to affect not only learning, but also other social aspects such as mental health, violence or pronounced social inequalities. The response from government, civil society and development partners has been prompt and decisive, but there are still gaps and challenges that need to be addressed. Distance learning experiences have so far provided valuable lessons, including the importance of quickly adapting the education system to changing realities.

Traditional education must not only be adapted and reformed, but this reforming process must embrace opportunities for innovation and thus become more open to meet the current demands of children, young people, including those from vulnerable groups, and members of society at large.

The pandemic situation can turn into an opportunity to rethink the curriculum, the teaching-learning-evaluation processes and the development of students' skills in order to strengthen their online learning skills and support their motivation. According to some international data, despite global efforts to support the recovery of educational systems, they still face major disruptions and obstacles. There should be an emphasis on maintaining continuity of education as a priority for world governments.

Opinions about online education are divided: while some education experts believe that it is a "pure disaster" with lifelong consequences for current students generating huge educational losses and emotional disturbances, others believe that it represents the solution of

the future . Online education cannot replace the classical one, especially in small classes, but it can complement it. And in health crisis situations, such as the coronavirus pandemic, it can be a viable solution for states with fragile medical systems, such as the Romanian one, contributing to a reduction in pressure on them.

At the same time, such "events" can contribute to a real modernization of Romanian education, by introducing and familiarizing teachers and students on a large scale with computerized work techniques and improving skills in this regard. This is provided that the "technological advantage" gained thanks to online education is not subsequently wasted, given that public health specialists believe that global environmental changes are creating the conditions for an ever-increasing frequency of pandemics: "it is painful that Romania has so far not been concerned with digitizing the education system, although E-learning platforms have been created".

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