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STARTING HIGH SCHOOL DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC – EXPLORING STUDENTS' OPINIONS

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Abstract

Teenagers represent a vulnerable category of persons that was significantly affected during the Covid-19 pandemic due to the contradiction between their specific needs to socialize with their peers, to be independent and the strict rules on social distancing imposed by authorities in this context. The present study explores students' opinions regarding the changes that emerged within the pandemic context regarding their interactions with peers, teachers and also their educational experience. We focused on a special context and period, namely the beginning of high school during the Covid-19 Pandemic. The students in the investigated group carried out online education for most of the time during their first year of high school. We tried to identify how their communication with peers and teachers took place within this particular distance learning approach, but we investigated also aspects regarding their experience with online teaching and learning. We considered these teenagers mature enough to share valuable opinions, worthy of consideration for creating counselling programs or activities in order to respond to their needs and to help them to adapt better and easier to the specifics of this period and context.

Keywords: High school beginning, online education, pandemic context, teenagers

1. Introduction

The 2020-2021 school year was marked by the epidemiological situation created by the Covid-19 pandemic, and the conduct of educational activities in schools took place in a particular manner in Romania. The face-to-face classes and activities were combined with the online ones, the latter being predominant in the case of older students and in case of those who were not on the verge of exams. The main decision factor for the option for online or face-to-face schooling was the epidemiological situation. Every two weeks, starting from September 2020, for each county the situation was re-evaluated and new decisions were taken according to each particular situation. However, the online classes were predominant in most parts of the country. In this context we ask ourselves if the pandemic context accelerated the digitalization of the educational system, which has been discussed for a long time; taking into consideration the various actions undertaken regarding the transition to online education and the optimization of the educational activities conducted in the online manner (Romanian Ministry of Education and Research, 2020).

For the ninth grade students involved in the present research, who found themselves during their first year of high school, the 2020-2021 school year was characterized by many educational activities conducted online. These students only went to school for face-to-face classes for a period of seven weeks from the total of 34 weeks of the school year. These seven weeks were divided in two main periods: two weeks at the beginning of the school year, when they went to school in small groups, meeting only part of their colleagues; and five weeks at the end of the school year, when they met all their class colleagues, but had to respect a series of specific rules imposed by the pandemic context, such as wearing a mask or passing through a brief medical check-up in order to enter school every morning (Romanian Ministry of Education and Research & Romanian Ministry of Health, 2020).

The short period of time when these students interacted with their teachers and peers face-to-face did, for sure, influence their communication way, taking into consideration the contradiction between their socialization needs, specific for teenagers, and the rules imposed in the pandemic context (Ravens-Sieberer et al., 2021).

Moving from one stage of schooling to the next can be challenging for students (Capel et al., 2007). Rapid and main changes in students' lives take place in this context and can lead to problems related to non-attendance, school failure, and inappropriate or challenging behaviour (Howard & Johnson, 2004). This important stage in their educational lives ovelaps with changes in their social, emotional, physical and cognitive development (Wenden, 2015). The adolescents involved in the current research had to face a double challenge, since their transition to high school took place during the pandemic times. The communication process between them and their peers and teachers was significantly affected, since the nonverbal and paraverbal aspects of the communication process cannot be identified so easy as in the case of face-to-face interaction (Muste, 2016). The aim of this study is to follow a group of teenagers through their transition into high school in the pandemic context and to find out their insights regarding different aspects particular to this situation: conducting online schooling, development of new skills according to this particular situation, communication with peers and teachers, and the adjustment to the changes imposed by the specifics of high school. The experience they share is valuable, because their

ideas can help us identify how to enable a positive transition to high school within a pandemic context and can show the support they need in order to maintain their academic performance, health and wellbeing (Wenden, 2015).

2. Problem Statement

The negative impact of this pandemic on children and adolescents in general, and on those who are at risk particularly, has been already been proven (Ravens-Sieberer et al., 2021). But it is important to identify how to intervene in this context in order to maintain their health, both physically and mentally, and to conduct an intervention according to the specific needs of each group of children or teenagers. Not only politicians, parents, teachers or doctors have to be involved in overcoming this sensitive situation, but also the main beneficiaries, namely the children. When they are mature enough to express valuable, worthy, opinions and offer valid arguments for these, it is very important to take them into account as well. Children's concerns should be carefully listened and taken into consideration as a starting point for any interventional action. Offering children stability, security and comfort within the current context have to remain main priorities both for families and teachers, in order to prevent the loss of a generation of students (Baird et al., 2020).

3. Research Questions

The present exploratory research aimed to answer the following research questions:
- How did the adolescents perceive the beginning of high school during this special period?
- How did they manage to communicate with their peers and teachers within the online education context?
- Did online education help teenagers to develop new skills?
- What do the adolescents think about online teaching-learning activities conducted in their first year of high school, compared to the ones conducted last year, when they experienced in the middle of the school year the transition from face-to-face to online schooling?

4. Purpose of the Study

Within the current study we aimed to investigate the opinions of a group of teenagers (ninth graders, in Romania) regarding their educational experiences and communication with peers and teachers during their first year of high school. The investigated group has conducted online classes for the most time of this school year, going physically to school only two weeks at the beginning of the school year and one month at the end of it. So, we considered these teenagers mature enough to share valuable insights regarding the investigated aspects. They also had a relatively long experience with online classes due to social distancing and school closure measures imposed by authorities since March 2020. Given this fact, we also asked teenagers to evaluate themselves and to try to identify, if the online classes gave them the possibility to develop new skills. We aimed to find out which were the skills the teenagers think they developed during their first year of high school, but related also to the online context of teaching and

learning and taken into consideration the fact that the actual curriculum focuses on practical skills training (Muste, 2016).

5.   Research Methods

The method used to identify in-depth information within the current research was the questionnaire-based survey. The questionnaire included 20 questions, 18 of them were open-ended questions and the other two required demographic information. The option for open-ended questions was supported by the main purpose of our study, namely to explore opinions of teenagers, thus, we considered that this type of questions gives the possibility to share personal thoughts, feelings and attitudes better than close-ended questions. The questionnaire was anonymous, fact that facilitated obtaining honest answers. The questionnaire was developed and completed online, in June 2021, after the end of the school year. The participants (N=22, 12 girls and 10 boys) were ninth graders from George Cosbuc School, Cluj-Napoca, Romania, learning in the same class. The average age of these students was 15,5 years old. They all live in the city and have good access to internet. Their high school debut was marked by many changes: new teachers, new colleagues and also a different structure of their timetable and studied content according to the profile they chose to study during high school. We chose to investigate the opinions of the teenagers taking into consideration the fact that students' needs and wishes are the most important thing in the actual child-centeredness paradigm. Smart & Cappel (2006) mention also that only few studies have focused before on students' satisfaction with online education. The investigated students experienced also the sudden transition from face-to-face educational activities to online ones, during the second semester of the school year 2019-2020, when they were eight graders and were in front of important exams, which they had to pass at the end of middle-school in order to get to high school. So, within our approach, we aimed that they fell free to express themselves regarding the investigated topics. Their answers were categorized and analysed in a qualitative manner within our exploratory investigation.

6.   Findings

The teenagers involved in the current study returned the completed questionnaires to the researcher. Fortunately, all students answered all questions within the questionnaire, although the number of open questions was high. The obtained results were gathered around the main aspects aimed by the research questions and will be presented according to these.

6.1.   Students' opinion regarding the beginning of high school during the pandemic

All students in the investigated group were very excited about the beginning of high school. They thought that after the exams that they had to pass in order to get to high school, the next school year will be easier and they will be more relaxed and will have the opportunity to focus more on subjects and activities they really like, experiencing a different way of learning. Another reason mentioned by them was the fact that they wished to know all their colleagues, especially the new ones. Unfortunately, their wish didn't come true immediately, because the period they went to school and conducted face-to-face

schooling was a very short one and they had to respect strict rules (social distance, mask wearing, division in small groups etc.).

During the first two weeks of the 2020-2021 school year these students went to school, but only in small groups, namely the first week the didactic activities were conducted with half of the class face-to-face while the other students were at home and took part to the classes online, and in the second week the second group went to school and the first one remained at home. When students found out how they will conduct their classes they were able to identify both strengths and limits of this context. They were happy that they didn't have to wear a mask and they could save some paper while studying from home, where they felt more comfortable (the possibility to sleep longer in the morning, ease of accessing information sources), but they also noticed the main disadvantages of online classes: less time spent outdoors; difficulty in retaining new information; the teacher's weaker control over the group of students; the lack of involvement of some students during classes; the feeling of loneliness; the rapid onset of boredom; disappointment regarding the fact that certain classes cannot be conducted in labs; decreased motivation due to lack of immediate feedback from the teacher; impaired social life.

Near the end of the school year the students returned to school for the last five weeks of their first year of high school (the epidemiological situation permitted them to go back to school). The transition from online classes to face-to-face ones was, for the investigated group, not so easy. The difficulties they encountered regarded the following aspects: concentration difficulties; inconveniences due to wearing the mask for a long time; fatigue due to waking up earlier in the morning. But, all students mentioned that they got used to be happy for the simple fact that they had the possibility to go to school and wish to continue to go to school next year and if possible, without being obliged to wear masks or to comply with certain restrictions imposed by the pandemic context.

6.2. Students' experience regarding their communication with teachers and colleagues during the period of online education

During their first year of high school students managed to maintain communication with teachers and peers mostly at distance. Only few cases of face-to-face meetings in outdoor environments were mentioned.

All students mentioned that their communication with teachers took place within and with the help of the programs in which the online classes took place (Microsoft Teams, Zoom), but also via email or mobile applications like Whatsapp. The students noted that teachers answered very quickly to their messages and were more organized within the context of online education, compared to the last school year. Though, they felt the lack of direct feed-back during online classes (compared to face-to-face classes, when teachers can correct students directly and immediately). Occasionally, teachers conducted outdoor activities, during the period of returning to school and students felt that this kind of classes contributed a lot to the development of the communication process among the whole group. During online classes students reported that sometimes the communication with peers was more difficult and vague. Also, during the classes conducted online the teachers were frequently in the situation of repeating the same message more times, since not all students could perceive, receive or understand it from the start. Half of the students in the investigated group mentioned that they prefer to continue the online

communication with teachers, since they feel comfortable asking them different questions, while the other half of the investigated group wishes to go back to school and to interact directly with teachers.

The most frequently mentioned ways for online communication with peers in the studied group were: via mobile phone calls and messages, video calls, messages within different mobile or computer applications, video games, **Discord, Instagram** etc. These channels were used both during class, in parallel with classroom communication, and outside of class hours. The specific context of the investigated group, namely the fact that some of the students in this class were new in the group and they didn't get to meet all in person**,** led to the impossibility of making friends. The communication with peers took place only in small groups, composed mostly of students who knew each other from previous schooling years. Within the context of online classes, teachers tried to determine students to interact with their new colleagues by giving them many tasks that had to be solved in teams or small groups, but students felt that this was not enough to know sufficiently good their colleagues so that they can become friends (some of the students were constantly closing their webcam or microphone).

Another fact is that all students, except for one, wish to return to school, not necessarily to learn easier or more (reporting that for classes they prefer a mixed approach between online and face-to-face activities) , but to get to meet face-to-face all their colleagues and to spend more time with them. Students think that breaks are a good opportunity to get to know their colleagues better. Only one student, totally new in class, wished to maintain online communication with colleagues, because of the feelings related to social anxiety.

6.3. Students' observations regarding the skills developed during the period of online education

Although the students involved in our study encountered different difficulties during their first year of high school, period which involved mainly online classes, they were able to observe that the context of online teaching and learning helped them develop new skills. Surprisingly not only the digital skills were developed, but also some of the social skills and also skills related to the domain of critical thinking.

Regarding the digital skills, all students reported that they learned to use their computers better; they got familiar with using different programs which supported the implementation of online classes (like Microsoft Teams, Google Meet or Zoom) and with using the multiple functions and buttons available within these platforms (like uploading homework or projects). Students reported also that they learned to type faster than before, since most of their homework had to be written at the computer and they exchanged a lot of messages with their teachers and peers within the online classes. Part of the students mentioned also that they got so familiar with using the computer that they gave up taking notes with the help of handwriting and used exclusively the computer during classes. Only one student mentioned that during online classes he developed the ability to retain a lot of information by just listening to the teacher, without taking notes or doing anything else, fact that can be strongly related to his learning style.

Beyond developing digital skills the teenagers mentioned behaviours related to their social development. They helped each other to handle properly in the context of online education (for example

in uploading homework in notebooks, giving advice for sharing a presentation, information retrieval when the internet signal was low or blocked). Students felt that online environment offers them a greater degree of privacy and comfort (since they don't have to wear masks and they can turn off their webcam, if they need to) and they became more confident in answering to certain questions or tasks or just to speak freely during classes. Regarding the communication with teachers, the students reported that this became better, since they observed that it is crucial for them to ask questions and to regard their teacher as an important source of information (Cuc, 2013, 2014, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c). Although it was harder for them to concentrate and to be actively involved during online classes, they observed that this effort brings good results at the level of understanding the information transmitted by the teacher. Their public speaking skills were also stimulated during online classes, since each student had at least once the task to present a project. Taking into considerations that online classes involved also many interruptions due to different technical problems, students mentioned also they got used to accepting new, unknown and unfamiliar situations and they observed that they became more patient. Another aspect mentioned by half of the students was related to the evaluation process and the evaluation anxiety. The lack of physical presence of the teacher during the evaluations within online education determined students to become relaxed, so they didn't feel any kind of evaluation anxiety. Although the social and emotional development of students was also present within the context of online environment, it was not sufficient. Nine students affirmed that during their first year of high school and also due to the online manner of conducting classes they felt the need for educational counselling. Only one of these students has also benefited from counselling activities and considered that these helped a lot in adjusting to the many changes that this school year involved.

Unexpectedly, online classes have also contributed to the development of students' critical thinking mechanisms. Since many tasks which students had to resolve involved using the computer for searching information, they developed the ability to select correct information, searching it on proper websites. Most students also mentioned that they started to use the computer not only for fun or relaxation, but in a formative manner (to search valid and reliable information).

Two students mentioned also the development of their distributive attention during online classes, since they had to take notes, listen to the teacher and using different functions of the educational platform on which the class was conducted and that they became more self-taught during this period in order to manage their own time better and to gain simultaneously good academic achievements.

Personal development was also observed by one student, which mentioned that the period of online schooling was appropriate to discover new things about oneself and to identify activities that one can conduct alone (different hobbies).

6.4. Students' opinion regarding online classes during their first year of high school

A remarkable fact mentioned by all students was that all teachers were organized and the classes were better adjusted to the online environment compared to the second semester of the school year 2019-2020, when the pandemic started.

Teachers used various ways of teaching and half of students reported that they felt that their understanding was more stimulated in the online environment due to the multiple interactive activities

that took place during classes, while the other half reported that they felt that in the online environment their learning was affected and they gained less knowledge within this context and need the direct interaction with the teacher to ease their learning process. The students that felt that their learning was impaired by the online environment wish to return to school next year in order to retrieve the gaps in their knowledge and learn more and develop easier their skills (Cuc, 2013, 2014, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c). Students reported that they also miss taking part at various extracurricular projects and activities, which represent real opportunities for their knowledge and skills development.

The teaching-learning strategies used during the online classes and preferred by students included both synchronous and asynchronous moments. Most teachers gave students independent work starting from previous discussions conducted during class. Almost each class involved also conversations based on what students have studied before class. Teachers prepared handouts, which students went through before classes and which were used during the didactic activities together with digital contents and means like power-point presentations, films, jamboards etc. In order to determine students to actively involve during online classes most teachers gave students extra points for their activity during classes. The use of digital means and contents was also mentioned by students regarding the assessment domain. Students showed that their teachers used various evaluation methods, both traditional and modern, but adjusted to the online environment: tests in Forms, individual tasks, projects, essays. Students' opinions reflected the appreciation for teachers' attempt to adapt as well as possible to the context of online classes and to ease students' understanding, learning and development.

7. Conclusion

According to the results presented above, we can conclude that authorities need to focus their activity on a safe and efficient way of conducting education during pandemic times. Even if the students involved in this study do not represent a significant group for the approached topic, we can affirm that their opinions are worthy of consideration in order to optimize the educational process for the specific needs of students starting high school and conducting a lot of online classes. Their needs regarding going to school and interacting with their peers to get to know them better are complementary to the specific of their development stage. The need for counselling activities in order to overpass this sensitive period reflects also their developmental stage, but also the effects of isolation and lack of direct contact with peers during the pandemic. Taking into consideration that the teenagers involved in the present research have conducted online education for more than a year with only short interruptions, we can consider that their need for counselling reflects also the fact that their preparation for the transition to high school was insufficiently conducted within the online education context.

Teenagers are very interested in social connections with peers and find themselves in a period of gaining identity and independence from their parents. The social distancing measures determined significant changes in daily social life for everyone, but especially for teenagers. The effects of the lack of face-to-face interactions can be different from one case to another. So, the coping strategies conceived and suggested for adolescents should be strongly adapted to each case (Janssen et al., 2020; Cuc, 2013, 2014, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c).

During the period of online classes, students gained skills that help them use diverse instruments for knowledge and communication. Some of the new skills gained by students during this period, such as time management (students had to complete many multiple tasks in short time) or the ability to select the valid information from various online sources can be used in the future in other contexts related to school tasks (Muste, 2018). Schools should continue focusing on skills training for all students, so that they develop consistent communication and adjustment skills, which turned out to be essential in the situation created by the Covid-19 Pandemic.

We conclude that distance learning as a solution for the educational field during the pandemic context turned out to be a temporary, weak substitute for direct classroom interactions. Lifelong learning, as indicator of the quality of education, could be significantly slowed or stagnated as a consequence of the current situation (Unesco, 2020). Post-Covid-19 education should be based on guidance and support offered in the form of different trainings or counselling activities for all students, but also for parents, teachers and other actors involved directly in all educational actions. The quality and effects of online education need to be profound approached in future studies.

The present research has some limitations, regarding the sample of involved participants, their unilateral perspective and the few research methods used in the current situation. Another limit refers to the specific of the qualitative approach, namely results with a reduced validity due to the subjective perspective of the participants. Further studies can analyse more profound students' opinions related to online education, involving a larger sample of participants, but also more diverse research methods and instruments. Another aspect that can be approached by future studies refers to the corroboration of the students' opinions with the ones of teachers and authorities with decision power in the educational field.

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