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**ONLINE EDUCATION IN ROMANIA, BETWEEN CHALLENGE
AND BECOMING A NORM**

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Abstract

At the beginning of the third millennium, humanity faced a new challenge, that of a pandemic, a virus that endangered billions of lives. Historical memory had recorded such moments before, but collective memory was subjected to an extraordinary challenge for the 21st-century human being, who is self-centered, self-sufficient and omniscient. Education is a social phenomenon of major importance for the future of humanity that involves many factors, but its main actors are the pupils and the students. The educational process involves the transfer of knowledge from one generation to another, and, when taking this aspect into account, we must be aware that both pupils/students and teachers change a lot at relatively short intervals, so teaching/learning methods are also constantly changing as well. The sudden shift to online teaching has put many of those involved in the educational act in difficulty, especially those in preschool and primary education, where direct contact with children is vital. No online environment can replace the affective and emotional contact that children and teachers alike need in order to be able to create a learning environment. In a particular manner, preschoolers are the most difficult category you can work with online, they need movement, exploration, maintaining the fantasy and stories in kindergarten. Teachers/students reported that in many cases access to technology was poor: non-performing computers/smartphones/tablets, poor internet connection. There were also difficulties with other technical aspects specific to the use of new technologies - creating accounts, installing software, initiating synchronous sessions - video conferencing/webinars, etc.

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1. Introduction

The outbreak of COVID-19 in the Wuhan region, China in December 2019 and the global spread of the virus led the World Health Organization to declare COVID-19 a global health issue of international importance on January 30, 2020, and since March 1, 2020 it has been declared a pandemic (Cucinotta & Vanelli, 2020). The pandemic thus affected all areas of activity (health, economy, the socio-cultural or the political sector, etc.).

Education is the highest form of modelling and shaping the character and personality of children and young people. For this reason, education should be the fundamental priority of any society that seeks spiritual progress and material well-being for its people.

Throughout his history, the human being has had to face so many challenges: wars, plagues, famines, he has overcome them all more or less easily, with sustained efforts and often unimaginable sacrifices. This period, which we call a pandemic, has been extremely difficult for everyone, with schools and many other institutions being forced to close their doors for a while, looking for and finding other spaces (outside or online) and methods to continue their activities for the benefit of society.

The idea of distance education, of education in the virtual space, have been used over time, enjoying the continuous development of digital technology that improves from one year to the next.

The idea of an educational process that changes the paradigm of classical education, moving it to the virtual space, is not so new, but dates back to the middle of the 19th century, in higher education. At the time, this form of education was resorted to to shorten the long distances between the students and the University and to come to the support of those who were overwhelmed by the high costs involved in attending the physical courses. There cannot be a consensus regarding this form of education, because the opinions are so varied, but such an education can be called: online education.

The appeal to this form of education can be called an emergency measure during the COVID-19 pandemic (Bates, 2021). This educational model, at a distance, through online platforms, was implemented to reduce the discomfort felt by students/pupils when they switched from the face-to-face model to online platforms, this approach coming with both positive and negative aspects, with pluses and minuses.

Although the importance of online learning has inevitably emerged in this process, educators and students have encountered various difficulties in the process.

In this sense, the possibility of an online or partially online education for the future must be seriously considered, in order to be able to offer students a quality education.

There are several issues with regard to the permanence of online schooling, in view of many things that were not intuited or even if they were intuited could not be clarified and prepared to support for a longer period of time the school activity in the online environment.

The legislation in Romania did not include as a form of education, even for short or medium periods, distance education for the first cycle and the gymnasium cycle. For this, it was necessary to legislate the online entry of teaching activities.

The present study wants to highlight some of the benefits of this form of current education, but also the many challenges that can be overcome.

2. Problem Statement

In the Romanian national education system, the student is present in the educational process through physical participation in the classrooms every day of the week (students may have days off depending on how the schedule of the institution is established). In the development of a genuine education for life, it is essential to cultivate a stable connection and a fruitful cooperation between all the institutions involved in the educational process (central institutions, family, school, etc.), as well as to capitalize on their specific contributions.

More precisely, in today's consumer society, increasingly marked by a mentality that directs children, adolescents and young people towards artificial sensation and material gain, it is essential to cultivate a credible education focused on the guiding lights of life, both on a personal level and on the community level. In the context of the pandemic, the Romanian Government has undertaken to provide on request for both teachers and students a laptop or a tablet for online education. (Official Gazette, no. 590, 2020) and provided by order of the Minister the framework methodology for conducting teaching activities through technology and the Internet, as well as for the processing of personal data (Official Gazette, no. 837, 2020), establishing at the same time measures for the organization of activities in schools in conditions of epidemiological safety (Official Gazette, no. 942, 2021).

3. Research Questions

- i. How effective did this form of online education manage to be both from the perspective of the student and the teacher alike in Romania?
- ii. What solutions would there be to strengthen the education system in front of such a scenario in the future?
- iii. What can be done, nationally or even locally, to prevent such a situation?
- iv. How effective and objective can online assessment be?
- v. Is such a form of education viable in the future?

4. Purpose of the Study

The research aimed to investigate the viability for online or part-time online education in the near future and what are the major advantages and disadvantages in this regard.

The study aims to define on the basis of international decisions, implemented at national and local level, the rethinking of the classical education system and how online education can be a viable solution in a future dominated by technology and the Internet.

The experience of a new way of teaching in the university environment, through the implementation of online courses, has brought to light many shortcomings, but also potential perspectives to consider in the future in what online education is concerned. At the beginning, as might have been expected, the first shortcomings were related to logistics: lack of technical devices (laptops, computers, smartphones, etc.), lack of or poor internet connectivity, lack of minimal training in the use of IT technology, in the case of both teachers and students.

This study is not intended to be exhaustive, but seeks to highlight some positive aspects and shortcomings of online education.

5. Research Methods

The present research combines the descriptive and exploratory method to create a more complex vision of the education system (Creswell, 2013).

The research is based on the consultation of specialized studies from different parts of the world that, in their majority, highlight the same problems and define largely the same solutions regarding online education, but also its perspectives. The study is based on a theoretical and methodological research with as a starting point the research of the governmental decisions during the Covid-19 which were the basis of the national and local decisions regarding the education process..

The study is also based on the experience of a year and a half of online teaching, implying a detailed analysis of the pandemic period and how it influenced the education process. I found it appropriate that this approach for this research to establish the objectives, but also to emphasize the problems that arose during the research.

The qualitative and phenomenological properties become the characteristics of this research. Among the objectives of this research we also find the way in which people give meaning to such an approach, how they can interpret such a major change in their lives, that is why human perception and understanding regarding such a unique experience of the pandemic is very important (Stake, 2010).

6. Findings

In the current context, life shows us new, challenging faces every day, it tests our adaptive power and our ability to respond quickly in the most unexpected situations. Many variables, few constants, however, one of the aspects we all face is the fact that technology is part of our lives, of all of us, and children are particularly attracted to the digital, dynamic, colourful, interactive environment (Ghiță & Solomon, 2020). Children/young people from the youngest age have access to gadgets and manage them much better than adults or the elderly (with the necessary exceptions), they are acquainted with everything that means hi-tech. We may watch them at school or in parks, etc., but the children of today are so close and at the same time so far away (Aiken, 2019).

The health crisis caused by the SARS-COV-2 epidemic forced schools around the world to move online. According to the data provided by UNESCO, more than 1.7 billion children have been participating in the educational process from within their own houses since April 2020, prompting governments, educational institutions and teachers to look for ways to continue teaching in the best possible way (Grosseck & Crăciun, 2020).

In order to carry out the educational process in the best possible conditions, the Romanian Government proceeded to purchase electronic devices with internet connection, necessary to equip the state pre-university education units in order to facilitate distance teaching activities for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, enrolled in state pre-university education, to be carried out by the Ministry of Education and Research in 2020 (Official Gazette, no. 377, 2020). In the same pandemic context by

emergency ordinance no. 144 of August 24, 2020, the government undertook to ensure the minimum hygienic-sanitary conditions necessary for the pre-university education units of state (Official Gazette, no. 772, 2020).

Without claiming to have exhausted the issue of the new pedagogical philosophy imposed by a borderline situation, teachers in Romania were challenged to adapt quickly and send an important message to students: by means of continuous learning beyond the school and with online tools accessible to all, but also with much determination, we can make progress together and, more than ever, we can encourage students to learn and work independently (Grosseck & Crăciun, 2020).

Students and teachers alike were challenged by this peculiar way in which educational activities were carried out around the world, resorting to the form of distance learning in order to reduce the speed of the spread of the epidemic (Kaya, 2020).

In recent years, increasing access to connectivity has had the effect of facilitating communication between people separated by geographical space (Ilie, 2021). The smooth transition from a traditional education environment to distance and virtual learning could not happen overnight, this rapid transformation is related to various obstacles and challenges.

Most teachers discovered their ability to adapt to the new, showing creativity and originality. Many of the teachers without much experience in using electronic work tools (smartphones, tablets, laptops) learnt as quickly as possible to use them, to carry out their teaching activities on various dedicated platforms (Kinderpedia, Google Classroom, Zoom, Skype, WhatsApp, Quizizz, Wordwall, etc.). Many teachers set out to change their own learning paradigm, think of a more up-to-date communication plan, and identify new ways to motivate students to learn under the new conditions.

Teachers had to develop many different skills in order to ensure the success of online teaching, there being four distinct areas: pedagogy; social/sociological; organizational/managerial; technical/ICT (Adăscăliței, 2007).

At the pedagogical level, the online school involves: clear objectives, maximum flexibility, encouraging participation, promoting private conversations between students, concentrating discussions on titles that the student should understand, assigning simple tasks, taking into account and evaluating differences of opinion, inviting experts to participate in the discipline, etc. (Adăscăliței, 2007).

The challenges of the national education system have been innumerable, but education specialists have identified opportunities associated with online education during the pandemic (Muhammad & Kainat, 2020). Thus, several online libraries were developed, as well as several databases containing books, studies and specialized articles from different fields of interest, there were introduced TV broadcasts (for the primary classes, in particular), video lectures, online channels that provided support both to teachers and to pupils/students. The overcoming of the obvious gaps and shortcomings involved the entire society: the big IT companies, Microsoft, Google, Zoom, Slack, (Basilaida & Kavadze, 2020), which provided their knowledge and products for the smooth running of the educational process. Civil society also played a fundamental role, being very active and mobilizing its resources in an exemplary manner, especially in poor, disadvantaged areas, through many non-profit organizations that raised funds, purchased and donated computers to poor families around the world.

During this period, teaching-learning has moved mainly in the online environment, and the challenges faced by Romanian schools were related to: lack of predictability; heterogeneous school network, with a strong digital divide between schools; insufficiently developed digital skills for the efficient organization of the teaching/learning process in the online environment; reduced access to technology and reduced internet connectivity; reduced opportunities for families to provide support to education beneficiaries, children, to participate in online lessons/courses.

Following this not so easy experience, a project called SMART.Edu was developed at the national level. Edu is meant to take into account: the development of digital skills of pupils and students; school curriculum for emerging trades; lifelong digital education; initial and in-service training of teachers in the field of digital education; digital technology infrastructure and resources; connectivity; creation of Open Educational Resources (OER); cybersecurity, data protection, online security and IT ethics.

In the human relationship in the virtual space, one of the problems raised and which proved to be real is represented by cyberbullying. (Maher, 2008). This form of bullying occurs most of the time between young people who know each other and is generated by the desire to manifest their power and control over others and is no stranger to face-to-face bullying, which creates management problems for both parents as well as for teachers.

Lee and McLoughlin (2010) emphasize that geographical isolation takes away from social interaction, which could lower students' sense of belonging and consequently their motivation and desire to learn. They also list a lack of immediate feedback due to a lack of face-to-face interaction, time management issues, students' lack of experience with distance learning and technical knowledge, and lack of access to support and student services as potential disadvantages of distant learning, which also incorporate online education.

All the obstacles, shortcomings or difficulties encountered did not diminish the motivation for maintaining the quality of the educational act. The participation of students in online educational activities depended on their access to home infrastructure and on the provision of their households with internet connection, laptop/personal computer/printer (or mobile phone/tablet). The support that parents were able to provide to their own children (preschoolers and primary-school pupils) in accessing the lessons and learning resources delivered by the teachers was welcome in carrying out the activities (Romiță, 2006).

One of the most important disadvantages of online education was the assessment of the knowledge acquired during the educational process. Platforms were created where courses, seminars, homework, bibliography, but also exam tests were posted. Short-response grid tests have been shown to be effective in that they have been designed so that the student cannot access other sources of inspiration, and therefore to cheat, thus giving himself an advantage over his colleagues.

For example, in the classroom setting during an exam, a dishonest student may look at another student's test or use unauthorized notes hidden from the instructor. Although both behaviors are plausible, the inherent risks of getting caught are usually high enough to prevent most students from attempting these behaviors in the classroom. On the other hand, in the unproctored online setting, there is no way to confirm that the student registered for the course is taking the assessment, and if they are, there is no way to prevent him or her from getting unauthorized assistance. In both cases, the student's actions constitute

a behavior that gives one student an unfair advantage over other students on a test or assignment but the perceived risks and methods to gain that advantage are different depending on the learning environment (Adzima, 2020).

In order to take an online exam, you need even more IT knowledge, which the vast majority of teachers do not have, even if there are fairly quick guidelines for creating tests through applications such as: Google Forms, Kahoot, ASQ (another smart question), Wordwall, Quizizz, Google Meet, Edpuzzle (Vişan, 2021).

Among the benefits of online schooling we could list: facilitating the continuity of the educational process in safe conditions (in cases of health crisis, etc.), the rapid development of digital skills and a larger openness to the integration of technological means in the educational process, with students becoming accustomed with the use of various online platforms and enjoying the diversity of teaching approaches. The development of nonverbal communication, the mobilization of the actors involved in education for the acquisition and use of modern technology can also be called a plus of online education.

In the same time, the online education process can achieve an opening of the students to the public. If at the beginning the public can be made up only of teachers and students, being realized beyond these immediate connections (Richardson, 2005). The public can also include the family in this form of education.

Increasing the interaction between parent and child for a responsible involvement in obtaining academic performance in what school activities were concerned (yet, here we must also mention an immediately visible disadvantage, especially with regard to the young schoolchildren, who were in constant need of adult assistance and, in many cases, this situation made one of the parents leave their job temporarily), but also the increase of the degree of collaboration and mutual help between teachers bring added value to education.

Not being conditioned by location was probably one of the most important benefits of online education as it facilitated access to the study from anywhere, not to mention the ease of access without having to travel, which means saving the transport expenses and, in addition, it is ideal for days with unfavourable weather.

The main objective in this situation of health crisis was not to create a robust online training system, and online education was not meant for that, but rather to provide temporary access to training and support in a fast and reliable way, during a crisis situation.

Although very useful in the design and development of teaching, modern tools involved in teaching do not directly improve the quality of teaching only through their intrinsic qualities. They are only the means by which a good educational strategy can be put into practice so as to increase the quality of the complex teaching-learning process.

The lockdown in the formal education system has revealed that this alternative form of education can become an alternative in a pandemic situation like this one (Şeren & Ozcan, 2021) even if the online environment offers children / students an opening at a click away from what the world means and even if it can be considered as a strategy for the future of education, human, physical interaction can never be replaced. Undoubtedly, education cannot be done exclusively online, but only partially, because there are

subjects, practical works, laboratories, which require physical presence at school, so a school of the future can function both in the traditional form and online (Allen & Seaman, 2008).

It is possible to create a mixed form of learning, a combined one, but this is most often perceived as a mix between traditional education and the information and communication technology. It intertwines a variety of software applications and teaching methods, often a mix of web/online-based learning with traditional face-to-face learning (Grosseck & Crăciun, 2020).

7. Conclusions

The results of this research highlight the current state of the educational process in Romania during the pandemic, but also the opinion of teachers about education in the virtual space being shared, some appreciated the benefits of online education, and others highlighted the shortcomings, shortcomings and negative parts of this emergency period for education. These different opinions, without being a clear distinction in favour of one, are mostly based on their own experiences.

The learning techniques mentioned in this study represent only a few tools that can be available to schools to achieve a stable online learning process, based mainly on human resources, but also technical ones that bring together teachers and students, families and education specialists.

Amid the 2020 Covid-19 crisis, mobile learning was acknowledged as a sustainable educational opportunity, given that many students used their mobile devices to connect to online teaching activities. Both the activities and the resources were generally designed by teachers to be carried out with the help of fixed devices (desktop or laptop), which often led to students' feelings of increased fatigue and overload (Grosseck & Crăciun, 2020).

Towards the end of this trial period, both students, teachers and parents mentioned that things have improved: they have learned from mistakes, they have experimented, they have learned many new things, they have adapted to the new conditions.

For the future, it is necessary to develop digital early literacy programs for preschoolers, to familiarize children with IT technology, by using digital applications and games, in order to create the premises for the development of digital skills in students. It is not enough for preschoolers/schoolchildren to be inseparable from their phones, computers, etc. only for one or two games that are fashionable among their peers, but classic literacy and digital literacy should also be initiated from this young age.

Education in the virtual space has generated a significant change in the way to approach children's education, thus proving the need to develop new skills for both students and teachers. Although face-to-face education preserves its primacy in today's learning systems, we must accept the future prospects for online education that have been made possible by the pandemic.

The benefits of learning in the virtual space cannot be ignored, especially through the enhanced development of learning skills, of involvement in the educational process, preparing future generations for a successful approach to preparing for a 21st century, of speed in all fields.

Learning in the virtual space had the opportunity to help children to develop more developed communication skills, closer collaboration, media literacy, but also deepening it.

Acknowledgements

The current research also expresses the problems of all kinds that the students faced, taking into account the opinions of parents, teachers, and education specialists. It is recommended to carry out studies that highlight the problems that arose in the education process during the pandemic, being a topic not so deeply addressed before 2020, thus through a qualitative research, but also with a large amount of information obtained at the level locally to lay the foundations of viable online education projects by amending the legislation in force, thus creating a stable environment for a future crisis at national or international level.

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