

EDU WORLD 2022**Edu World International Conference Education Facing Contemporary World Issues****STUDENTS' RESILIENCE AND PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT IN
COVID 19 PANDEMIC**

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Abstract

The aim of the paper is to identify resources, social and emotional strategies that have ensured the resilience of students of the "Gheorghe Asachi" Technical University in Iasi facing the requirements of online education during the pandemic generated by the COVID 19 virus. The problem we started from is the transition of education in the online environment, the rapid transfer of teaching methods in the form of emergency teaching, so that students' adaptation also depended on their level of personal development and resilience. A qualitative research was conducted, based on the use of the focus group method. The participants in the investigation were students from years I, II and III, belonging to the 11 faculties with a technical profile within the university. Nine focus groups were organized. The objectives of the research focused on the effects of online education on students' social-emotional adaptation in a pandemic context: 1) analysis of the feeling of emotional security; 2) the particularities of verbal and nonverbal communication on self-esteem /self-affirmation capacity; 3) analysis of acquisitions in terms of personal development; 4) analysis of applied adaptation strategies. As results, the following were highlighted: 1) the disruptive effects of online education on students were manifested by emotional insecurity, difficulties in verbal and non-verbal communication, lack of self-confidence and diminished interaction; 2) students' resilient resources are: the ability to learn digitization techniques, self-presentation skills, proactive behaviour. The novelty of our research is the focus on the analysis of interpersonal relationships and the emotional impact of online education.

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1. Introduction

Since 11 March 2020, following the decision of the Ministry of Education and Research to suspend the face-to-face courses, the Romanian education system has shifted to new communication practices to ensure continuity of learning and organizational functioning. The MEC and its subordinate institutions have promoted several digital initiatives and programmes in recent decades, starting with the Computerized Educational System (SEI) programme, the eTwinning action, educators' training programmes in the use of new technologies and ending with attempts to establish an open educational resource base or the steps in the ROSE and CRED projects (Botnariuc et al., 2020). But the element that led to major pressure on the education system and society as a whole was the almost exclusive use of remote media to educate.

The Romanian education system is only partially prepared, some teachers do not currently have enough information and skills specific to computer-assisted training. In these circumstances, a series of logistical, pedagogical, technical and content impediments appeared in the field of many school and university objects of study. All these represent challenges that professors, students, parents and decision makers of education have had to face in the fast pace in which they appeared, showing availability, interest, pedagogical mastery, inventiveness. Our university has initiated and implemented ROSE projects for each faculty, with the aim of supporting students in the learning process and reducing school dropout. An important dimension, in addition to specialized remedial activities, was represented by personal development workshops, coaching for the development of transversal skills and abilities for life, career counselling. Through these activities, the creativity of teachers and students and their coping ability were capitalized. Online or remote education implies that students are physically distant from the instructors and require a delivery method. Online education has been studied (Ceobanu et al., 2020; Istrate, 2013) and certain educational e-learning techniques have been implemented, but its extension to mainstream education involves special educational planning and design. The challenges of education in the pandemic were so great that pedagogical mastery and inventiveness required a transposition to another level.

Resilience has been defined as a person's ability to adapt positively to changes and negative life events (Cicchetti, 2010; Masten, 2014) states that resilience must be seen as the interface between the individual characteristics of people and the characteristics of the environment, as a balance between stressors and personal skills to deal with them, but also as a dynamic development process that is crucial in moments of transition in life. Overall, resilience is the process that allows individuals, families and human groups to overcome their difficult situations, the trauma not to present mental disorders, to continue to live as before (or almost as before), and may even show a better mental functioning than before, thanks to what is called post-traumatic development or growth (Masten, 2020).

Resilience is also represented as the process of personal development and growth of the individual, their ability to recover from traumatic events, cope with difficulties and recover quickly (Seedat, 2020). During emergencies, (second wave of COVID-19, hurricanes, war, and so on) it is important to remember that online or blended instructional delivery has to be a creative and flexible emergent response to the particular crisis, and requires more reflection and communication than any of the previous educational experiences because it is unique to the emergency circumstances (Aguilera-Hermida, 2020). Aguilera-Hermida showed in his recent study that motivation, self-efficacy, and cognitive engagement decreased

after the transition, and only the use of technology increased. It is desirable for the teacher to identify sources of tension, areas of conflict between students and also sources of internal conflict and to identify a set of procedures to apply to the group of students to prevent dissent and constructively remedy conflict situations (Moldovan & Bocoş, 2021). Teachers should be able to customize a general set of teaching and resolution strategies to the specific situations.

2. Problem Statement

Online education in the context of the pandemic has generated an emergency strategy in which each teacher has tried to adapt his teaching methods to the new reality. The teachers focused especially on transmitting information, knowledge through various methods, on supporting learning, but the socio-emotional support that the students needed was difficult to provide. The question at this time is whether Romanian education can overcome the current stage of emergency relocated teaching and can meet the quality standards of an updated digitized teaching (Opre et al., 2020). The cited authors propose an optimized teaching strategy, called interactive online teaching. This implies an essential paradigm shift that will gradually develop a new pedagogy, one that values the strengths of digital educational platforms and has as its central dimension interactivity. Changes and challenges can be turned into opportunities that will push us to think of more efficient ways to ensure quality education during this uncertain period and in the future (Tisseron, 2020). In this context, the resilient strategies of the students varied, being located at the intersection between their own potential and the offer of the educational environment in which they worked. The social and emotional strategies used by students to adapt to new requirements are diverse, and the effects of educational challenges on their personal development are also worth investigating.

3. Research Questions

A qualitative research was conducted, based on the use of the focus group method. The questions we started with were related to how online education in the context of the Covid 19 pandemic influenced students' sense of emotional security, the verbal and nonverbal communication strategies they used, self-esteem, and assertive behaviour. We were also interested in what resilient strategies they applied and whether they benefited from new personal development acquisitions. These questions have generated the objectives of the research, focused on the effects of online education on students' social-emotional adaptation in a pandemic context: 1) analysis of the feeling of emotional security; 2) the particularities of verbal and nonverbal communication on self-esteem /self-affirmation capacity; 3) analysis of acquisitions in terms of personal development; 4) analysis of applied adaptation strategies.

4. Purpose of the Study

The aim of the study is to collect (and interpret) empirical data to outline the perception of young people about their own coping behaviours and resilient resources to the requirements and particularities of online education during this pandemic. We set out to evaluate the elements of resilience and the strategies for adapting the students of the "Gheorghe Asachi" Technical University of Iasi to the online education

challenges. Based on the theoretical and methodological landmarks, we operationalized the concept of resilience through four relevant dimensions for adapting students to online education in the context of the pandemic: the feeling of emotional security, self-esteem and assertiveness, personal development and adaptation strategies.

5. Research Methods

We organized and led nine exploratory workshop activities based on focus groups. Consultative seminars and workshops have been used for exploratory purposes in various studies addressing extremely new topics and in which the literature is missing or minimal (Sim & Waterfield, 2019; Whittake, 2010; Williams et al., 2020). Faced with such a situation, to which is added the fact that they make a double contribution - the completion of scientific research data with empirical data, on the one hand and the opening of multiple new research perspectives, on the other hand, we decided to choose them for this work as well.

For the selection of focus group participants we used the intentional sampling strategy (Krueger & Casey, 2005), meaning that the participants were selected based on the purpose of the study. We chose students from years I, II and III of studies who attended the online faculty and who did not abandon the courses of the pedagogical training module and had graduated the last course, because they were subjected to an additional academic effort. We did not take into account their academic results, but only the status of graduate of psycho-pedagogical courses. We used the list method to identify the subjects in the student groups. This method involved drawing up a list of students who attended over 80% in three core courses and then randomly setting up nine groups of 8 people each. Students of years I, II and III of the "Gheorghe Asachi" Technical University from Iasi who complete the training module for teaching career in the Department for Teacher Training were invited to participate in the workshop on "Online school - challenges and solutions". 72 people were interviewed, 56 male and 16 female, belonging to the technical specializations: Mechanics, Electrical Engineering, Energy and Applied Informatics, Constructions and Installations, Construction Machinery and Industrial Management, Materials Science and Engineering, Hydrotechnics, Geodesy and Environmental Engineering, Architecture. The nine workshops were designed and developed according to the scenarios involved in the focus groups method, a set of 10 semi-structured questions being the skeleton on which the debate was built for each of them (Bulai, 2018; Krueger & Casey, 2005; Williams & Katz, 2001). The questions were divided into five categories of questions: an opening question, an introductory question, three transition questions, six key questions, three closing questions. For the elaboration of the interview guide we formed a team of 5 psychological experts, teachers at our university, who were asked to provide ideas on the questions that could be addressed during the interview, in accordance with the purpose of the research. The interview guide was tested as an individual interview on three people who matched the focus groups of our study. Following this test, we decided on the final form of the focus group guide.

The workshops were held three times for each year of study as follows: 3 groups attended by first year students, 3 groups attended by second year students, 3 groups attended by third year students. Data saturation was obtained when responses began to be repeated and no new information was obtained. Thus, we decided as a limit of data analysis three groups for each year of study. The activity took place

online on the Microsoft Teams platform, the duration varying in the interval of approximately 90 - 120 minutes depending on the pace of the participants' interventions.

The agreement of the students' participation and the one to record the discussions was requested by e-mail.

6. Findings

The results of the qualitative research we developed were obtained following the analysis of the responses generated in the nine focus group meetings organised. Data analysis consists of examining, categorizing, tabulating, or recombining accumulated observations in any other way to serve the original purpose of the study (Bulai, 2018; Krueger & Casey, 2005). We have completely transcribed the focus group discussions, which were recorded, to be used as material for analysis. We also compared the transcript with the notes taken by the co-moderator during the interviews. For data analysis, we used the "roomy table" method recommended by Krueger and Casey (2005). In each of the focus group workshops, the four themes that we investigated and their sub-themes were outlined:

6.1. Emotional security

The feeling of emotional security during the online school in pandemic was investigated in students in years I, II and III of study. The first observation is related to the fact that, in general, students tended to identify actions rather than emotions. It was necessary to use questions from the auxiliary set of the focus group guide, to stimulate the students to express the emotional state that the events produced during this period. There were differences in the identification of aspects generating security or emotional insecurity in the three years of study. The status of the student and the safety of this state were prejudiced to the first year students because they started the academic year in the online version. This created concern and alertness, wondering if they would be able to cope with the demands. From this point of view, students in years II and III considered that they had the benefit of the relationship already built with their professors and faculty classmates.

The first year students reported that, although it is important that they are students, they feel that it is a dream because nothing seems to have changed, they stay at home most of the time and carry out online activities. One respondent stated: "It is very nice to be at the faculty, to sit at a desk, in imposing lecture halls, to live that emotion that does not compare to anything else."

Another important aspect felt by students of online classes is the lack of social relationships. They all said that "we were isolated; we felt alone, we are living in a state of loneliness." This aspect was generated by the conditions imposed by the pandemic - the bans on leaving the house, the suspension of all the activities, the limitation of contacts. They spent time with the family, but also within it there were many changes related to the rhythm of daily life. They admitted that they had more personal time and time for their family. Many experienced a feeling similar to that of an unexpected holiday and "enjoyed the so-called free time." Later, questions arose about what would happen, feelings of fear and insecurity began to appear. For others, the specific elements of the family of origin (characteristics of the living space, size of the house, number of rooms or family members, those who had to be connected at the same

time) contributed to the increase of stress during online teaching activities. One student stated: “The word that describes very well what I was feeling is - strange. What feelings did I experience? Fear all the time - of what will happen.” Thus, although each family member had their own schedule, there were overlapping situations that generated discomfort, leading to the impossibility of being active. Without realizing it, their intimate space was invaded and exposed to everyone at the same time.

6.2. Forms of communication and their effect on self-esteem and assertiveness

We analysed the peculiarities of verbal and non-verbal communication in the online environment and their effect on students' self-esteem and their ability to express themselves and to assert themselves assertively in learning activities. It could be noticed that the students felt self-insecurity, inhibition due to the fear that they are being judged without being able to defend themselves and blockage generated by the reduction of non-verbal communication in the same space. The request to activate the camcorder causes the students to give up the comfort zone in which they were, because in this way, although in an indirect way, they allowed others to obtain information about them as persons. Some students felt judged by their personal physical appearance or the room in which they were and even the phenomenon of cyberbullying appeared. From a student's account: “I felt discomfort during classes. I was receiving a picture with a certain classmate and the message said - look what s/he looks like today?! look how s/he is sitting?!... and I automatically thought that others were doing the same with me! ” The students themselves noticed that they fall into several categories - those who feel comfortable speaking in front of the camera, are confident, those who do not feel comfortable but still try and those who actually refuse to communicate. From a student's answer we quote: “I realised that for some it is much easier to speak in front of the camera. For me it has always been a state full of emotions. Students' assertion skills in the regular physical environment are required to find new ways to cope. Some students do not find them and there is even a social braking effect; due to the fact that the number of those who are actively involved in the course is low, they choose not to get involved either. There is a phenomenon of hiding behind the cameras for various reasons: they do not have the necessary knowledge to answer, they do not have the courage to say that they do not understand, they feel protected by a "visual anonymity", and they feel that there can be no immediate consequences that could make them to do otherwise.

There were also students who mentioned that they had a sense of social responsibility and took responsibility for active participation in classes, even if many do not. In their case, the difficulty of the situation determines them to have a proactive attitude. The fact that they are appreciated validated by professors increases their self-esteem and they gain the courage to assert themselves by solving tasks in courses and seminars with the camera on.

6.3. Acquisitions in terms of personal development

The resilience capacity is also based on the acquisitions that the person makes in terms of personal development. New skills are trained to deal with a situation and a re-signification of negative events and their affects is achieved. Personal development includes activities and experiences that have the ultimate goal of improving awareness, developing personal talents and abilities, improving the quality of life and contributing to the realisation of personal aspirations and dreams. For many people, the COVID-19

pandemic qualifies as a seismic event, given that it not only provokes a health scare, but interrupts the familiar rhythms and patterns of daily life, is impossible to escape (Kim et al., 2021). It has therefore, forced many people to begin to examine alternative ways of life and the recognition of new possibilities.

A first acquisition that the students are talking about is that they have acquired new technical knowledge of working with online platforms and have gained the courage to use them, although before they were not very skilled. The difficulties of this period also led them to find alternatives to reduce loneliness and connect with others. Thus, they intensified the connections on social networks and even developed the habit of meeting online without a professor's request. Students in years II and III found ways to connect more easily and help each other to feel better or support one another in faculty projects. The first year students remained more alienated and found the solution to maintain the old groups of friends, during high school. A first year student says: "In the first phase of the pandemic we were all confused, and later we were somehow forced, forced by events to readjust, we get out of our comfort zone ... at least for me a first important step was the fact that I learned to be self-taught". We also met the situation of a first year student who pointed out that this period allowed him to find business and marketing ideas, although he chose not to use them now to focus on study, and other students who already have a job mentioned that they found online a framework to capitalise on their life and professional experience and to be listened to and appreciated for what they do.

6.4. Adaptation strategies

Efforts to adapt to the new way of working were met by both sides – students and professors. Many of the participants described the period at the beginning of the pandemic as "weird" because they felt that the same sense of insecurity, of exploration of what needed to be done, was observed in both them and their professors. This was a time when some of them became aware of the efforts that professors made to prepare for the hours they had, which made them feel a sense of communion.

At first many found that working online can be interesting. It was curiosity for a new way of working. The students recount: "We started to get used to different platforms, to do homework, to officially interact only in the virtual environment." The adaptation strategy was that they became familiar with the work platforms and there was, however, a way of interacting.

For other students it was a benefit the fact that they could record courses, to re-listen to them later. One solution that many of them applied was to receive the supporting materials and study them individually according to their own program. "[...] I know myself quite well and I know that I have a slow pace of work and I do not always keep up with what is discussed during the classes was an opportunity because I was recording and we can then re-play that class and understand it at my own pace".

When working with the computer became overwhelming, the faculty messages and tasks overloaded, the students found as solution of adaptation the active participation only in interactive activities that incited their interest through activating and creative teaching methods. This expanded the behaviour of connecting the devices without the student's verbal participation.

Other adaptation strategies related to psychological balancing and resulted in listening to music, computer games, time spent on social networks, physical work in the household, for those who live in a

house, painting or involvement in other activities for which in the physical school they did not have time. It re-signified the importance of family and time spent with others.

7. Conclusions

The research provided information on the personal strategies and resilient resources of the investigated students activated by them in online education during the Covid 19 pandemic. The results bring a less studied facet in the latest researches published in Romania (Opre et al., 2020), which is found internationally - emotional security, interpersonal communication, activism and self-assertion of students in an online context. Thus, some research examines symptoms of stress and lack of motivation to engage in learning (Di Pietro et al., 2020), other research examines the benefits of online education in terms of growth and personal development, as well as cybersecurity problems (Oyedotun, 2020), others study implications for mental health challenges, especially during a pandemic, that could have long-term consequences on students' health and education (Browning et al., 2021). The latest studies on the subject of online education in pandemics are particularly focused on the effects on learning and performance of pupils and students, as well as on their access to remote learning during the Covid 19 pandemic (Azubuike et al., 2020; Dhawan, 2020). In an international context, our paper presents a perspective on the resources and socio-emotional strategies applied by ethnic students in Romania, showing behavioural patterns and attitudes influenced by the educational and social context of this area. We thus contribute to the in-depth analysis of the psychological and social effects of online education on young people and to the consolidation of a new pedagogical paradigm focused on the needs of connection and emotional security of students in an interactive online education.

The limitations of the research are related to the fact that the group belongs to a specific category of students, it is limited in number and therefore the results cannot be generalized. It is also possible that in the focus group discussions there will be a tendency for social desirability, so that the disclosures will be limited and the participants will protect their image. Also, the focus group involves, in the physical variant, the face-to-face meeting of the participants and the arrangement of the chairs in a circle or horseshoe, in such a way that they have eye contact and no blockages in communication. The alternative way practiced by us was online focus-groups and we made sure that each student has an active camcorder throughout the activity we created interaction, dynamism and emotional openness, so that we can reduce possible communication blockages due to online exposure.

This sudden shift to online activity has had a strong emotional impact on students. Their reactions were different in the sense that first-year students felt a much stronger sense of emotional insecurity. The students belonging to the groups from years II or III, having already validated the student status through results obtained in the previous years of studies, felt much more strongly the interpersonal rupture occurred at the level of peer groups, but also in terms of relationship with teachers. From the communication process point of view, all students, regardless of the year of study, acknowledged that although they communicated, the online environment was a challenge. For some of them it was an opportunity to assert themselves, for others it was a blockage.

We conclude that these results have an ascertaining character at the level of a small group, because the participants in the organized focus groups were selected students from those who attend the psycho-

pedagogical module within the "Gheorghe Asachi" Technical University of Iași. In the future, it would be appropriate to extend the analysis to an larger group of university participants, possibly a comparative analysis of the effects of emotionally adapting students to the online work environment of different universities.

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