

## THE IMPACT OF THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC (COVID-19) ON THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM IN ROMANIA

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**ABSTRACT:** *In the context of the current crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, educational institutions have been forced to move towards online education, and the revolution in information and communication technology (ICT) has contributed to the emergence of new and innovative learning methods for students. E-learning provides easier access to learning, promotes flexibility, so that students can overcome the limitations of space and time; it also offers greater potential for the teaching process to focus on the needs and possibilities of learners, focusing on different learning styles.*

**Keywords:** *Coronavirus (Covid-19); online education; distance education; resilience to change;*

### Introduction

Romania has been facing for over 6 months a crisis caused by the Sars-CoV-2 virus, called the Covid-19 pandemic, which has caused numerous economic and social imbalances. The medical crisis is closely monitored because it produces immediate effects. This is the first time that our country is facing a crisis in the health sector and its socio-economic effects come when Romanian society is extremely vulnerable, and cannot sustain a large public deficit in support of the economy and the population [ICCV, 2020].

It is well known that the Romanian medical system is underfunded, and the medical services were not prepared to act on such a large-scale disaster. However, even then, between March and October 2020, medical professionals mobilized quickly to reduce the risk of illness in the population.

The effects of the coronavirus pandemic will be sustainable and have a terrible impact on both the health system and the education level, causing a acute crisis in an entire generation of children.

Obviously, the first victims of the pandemic will be human health and life, but

they will also have serious secondary consequences, which are carried out simultaneously: Public schools budgets, economic crisis (job losses through business closures in the small and medium-sized enterprises sector, crisis with social implications (changes in people's relationships, lifestyles and quality of life, physical distance, loneliness and isolation [Baker, di Carlo & Weber, 2020].

It is difficult to predict today the extent of the economic downturn caused by the coronavirus pandemic, especially about its duration and severity.

The World Health Organization declared the coronavirus epidemic as a pandemic. In this context, public health experts have introduced restrictions including physical distance, self-isolation, or quarantine, and often require people to work from home where possible.

As a result of the rise in the disease rate in Romania, an increasing number of educational institutions (kindergartens, general schools, high schools, universities) have taken intensive measures to prevent and protect children, students, and staff alike. Most educational institutions are already in the process of transition to online teaching

platforms [Sasu, 2020].

Depending on the severity of the current crisis, it is essential that government action be taken immediately to implement educational policies that strengthen the education system, not only to emerge today, but to become strong enough to resist future crises.

### **Education in the digital environment**

The coronavirus pandemic made it possible for pupils and teachers to interact with each other for educational purposes using technology as an essential part of the learning process. Before the Covid-19 crisis, most students spent an average of one hour to four hours during the pandemic increased the time students spend on an electronic device daily to at least 6 hours a day. Thus, the well-being of the pupils/students is negatively influenced, becoming exhausted for most of them [Alexandru et. all., 2020].

In international literature, education was a priority during the period of the coronavirus pandemic, being considered an area where no inconsistency or discontinuity is permitted, affecting the education system [Huang et. Al., 2020].

For the Romanian education system, moving from face to face to online courses was a real challenge. Thus, for the development in good conditions of the educational act through technology and the Internet, recourse was made to the use of applications, educational platforms, through which teachers exercise their teaching-learning-assessment process, distributing various learning materials, textbooks, audio or video resources, etc. This crisis has revealed the educational opportunities that can be offered by the digital environment, but also the negative aspects of the lack of training of teaching staff in this field, as well as the acute need for training and skills development for online teaching. Teachers have not prepared their learning content to

adapt to online learning. There is a growing need for new effective pedagogical approaches to keep pupils/students involved and motivated in online learning mode, given that the rate of drop-out through distance learning is generally higher than in traditional face-to-face education.

The transition to online learning has raised questions for both teachers, parents and students about their ability to participate effectively in online education through existing technology. Is there a possibility to teach practical activities, laboratories, music and art courses online?

The use of technology to support the development of the educational act is a new field in Romania, being for the first time when the education system in our country is facing this situation.

The quality of the educational act in the online environment requires special attention. At the level of the European institutions, even before the pandemic, ensuring the quality of education is an essential indicator, oriented in two directions: the development of a high quality education and the development of an inclusive education [European Strategy, 2020].

At national level, the quality of education is included in a legislative framework, by setting up two agencies that manage the process in two large subsystems: The Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education [ARACIS], for university education, and The Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Pre-University Education [ARACIP], for pre-university education and include methodologies related to authorization, accreditation, periodic evaluation.

As a result of the spread of the pandemic at an alert pace, a major impact has been felt in education systems around the world, trying to reduce its negative effects. Thus, drastic measures were adopted regarding the "face-to-face" conduct of the classes. Since the beginning of the pandemic, most

countries have resorted to the total cessation of courses and the prohibition of access of pupils / students and teachers in schools.

After about a week, there was a sudden shift during classes in the online environment to keep pupils in touch with the educational act.

The second semester of the 2019-2020 school year took place exclusively online. From April 21, 2020, Order 4135, issued by the Ministry of Education and Research, enters into force, which requires parents to ensure access and participation of students with the necessary equipment for teaching activities conducted online by the educational institution.

The whole educational process has undergone radical changes, being necessary a readjustment to the new conditions. Thus, on April 23, 2020, the Government Emergency Ordinance no. 58/2020 was published in the Official Gazette on taking measures for the proper functioning of the education system

Ever since the obligation to carry out the educational act in the online environment, a series of impediments have appeared, triggered by the sudden transition of the entire educational process:

- many pupils / students were not prepared for the conduct of classes in the online environment;
- a large part of the students did not have the means and tools necessary to participate in online courses: stable internet connection, tablet, computer, laptop etc.;
- most teachers have not been trained to conduct online classes;
- the Romanian educational market did not have secure IT platforms;

About three weeks after the beginning of the pandemic, the ZOOM platform became the most used in the conduct of classes in the online environment.

The impact of physical distance measures on the transition of the educational process from the “face to face” meeting in the online

environment, brings to the fore the digitization of the educational process as a daily and indispensable practice.

In the opinion of Hegarty (2015), self-confidence is an essential factor in the online teaching-learning-assessment process. In this sense, he elaborated eight attributes of open pedagogy, through different open and flexible educational practices (Fig. 1).

Open educational practices use educational resources in order to improve the quality of the educational act and to innovate education. The eight dimensions are used to describe strategies and policies applicable in an open [online] learning system, through technology, encouraging participation through online networks to share knowledge, resources, ideas etc.

### **Proposals and solutions**

The pandemic generated by COVID-19 is characterized by uncertainty, fear, economic, educational, and social pressures.

Due to the development of educational processes in the online environment, it is necessary to rethink the types of standards used in the education system, adapted to the "current normality", as a priority from the perspective of ensuring the quality of education.

Given the current situation, educational standards should include:

- training modules carried out with teachers to use computer platforms dedicated to the educational process;
- implementation in the educational units of a high-performance live streaming communication system for carrying out the online teaching activity and a high-speed Internet connection;
- the purchase by educational institutions of Office 365 packages, which is a complete solution that includes communication and interconnectivity services such as: Microsoft Teams, Google Classroom, as well as the possibility of data storage;



Fig. 1. Eight attributes of Open Pedagogy, by Bronwyn Hegarty (2015)

- the possibilities of secure access of the pupils / students to the respective computer platforms.

### Conclusions

The current education system in Romania is rigorously monitored by decision-makers in government forums, for the implementation of flexible measures, leading to improved performance by educational institutions. The institutions approved in this regard, recommend the knowledge of the specific procedures necessary for e-learning and promote innovation in teaching-learning processes.

In the near future, there is no possibility of conducting the educational process directly, "face to face" in educational

institutions, so it is necessary to "adapt specific tools to quality management to new types of educational processes" [Chină, 2020].

In studies conducted in Romania in May 2020, the results show that only 63% of primary school students had access to a device with an Internet connection, compared to about 70% of middle school and high school students. At the same time, in the same study 40% of students' parents stated that they spend at least three hours a day to support their children's educational activities [IRES, 2020].

In parallel, UNICEF (2020) conducted a study in 8 counties in Romania, both in rural and urban areas, and its conclusions show that almost 80% of children from disadvantaged families did not have access to

IT equipment and did not have an internet connection, and for approximately 60% of children there were barriers in the development of educational activity in the online environment, due to both the lack of IT devices and the lack of digital skills of both parents, teachers and parents. Under these conditions, in order to carry out the educational act, teachers often turn to the

local postman to deliver the educational materials to the homes of vulnerable children. The effects of the pandemic produced changes in the Romanian education system, causing educational actors to develop their digital skills, having the possibility to continue the technology after the resumption of classes "face to face", in addition to the educational act.

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