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School during the pandemic. Challenges and uncertainties

Szkoła w czasie pandemii. Wyzwania i niepewności

Introduction

The crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has generated new unprecedented challenges worldwide to manage economies and societies in special conditions of health protection. The educational process management plays an important role among them, as it traditionally involves communities of children and young people who have to carry out their activities while keeping a physical distance, as a basic premise for limiting the spread of the new virus.

The government, ministries and schools are facing the challenge to plan the education process in very uncertain times. After a major education process disruption due to school closures and quarantine, the state gradually lifted the restrictions, but maintained the essential protection measures – in particular physical distance. Many school managers have decided not to reopen the

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institutions until September 2020. However, given that the virus is still circulating worldwide and the vaccination rate is still insufficient to control the spread of COVID-19, the countries are preparing for a “new normal” where education will be different from what we know and are used to today.

When the schools reopened, protective measures rendered it impossible to gather all students in classrooms. The class schedule has been changed, the access has been disrupted, and the teaching process has been provided in shifts. Short hours are completed with distance learning activities. Mixed learning periods are different for students. While some students return to school for a few days a week, others engage in remote learning only. Some students may also receive more face-to-face training than others, depending on their age, personal learning needs, or family and social circumstances. For example, children of key staff, such as nurses and doctors, have priority over other children in terms of classroom education.

Planning in such an environment is not an easy task. In the context of multiple unknown facts, the learning periods’ lack, anxiety and stress among teachers, children and families, which will certainly have long-lasting effects in the coming years, the ability to make the right decisions is more important than ever and is the premise for increasing the resilience of the education system.

Theoretical hypothesis

In the circumstances of the coronavirus pandemic, we want to highlight the impact that the pandemic crisis had on the education system in the Republic of Moldova. We will mention the good practices, as well as the mistakes made by the authorities and local decision makers, which accentuated the spread of COVID-19, making it necessary to implement restrictive measures.

The present research focuses on the educational activity and the pandemic evolution from March 2020, with the declaration of the state of emergency in the Republic of Moldova, until May 2021, the end of the next school year, a time slot considered representative when the premise for large-scale immunisation against the new virus was created.

Methodological hypothesis

Due to the fact that the subject is still relatively little studied in the scientific literature, especially in view of the education system peculiarities of the former

USSR area, and particularly the Republic of Moldova, the methodological approach focused on highlighting the challenges, good practices and shortcomings towards the legislative framework. Thus, the authors tried to offer practical and alternative solutions to the reported deficiencies.

Theoretical bibliographic resources, official statistical data, news from the media, as well as opinions of specialists and political-administrative decision-makers from that moment were consulted. Basing on this information, the author outlined her own vision regarding the causes and socio-economic consequences of the analysed phenomena in her double capacity as a parent and teacher (Ministry of Education, 2020).

Presentation of research results

In uncertain times, ensuring that plans and strategies are well understood by the students is extremely important. Transparent, clear, and regular communication of the planning process plays a key role in reassuring families that schools are ready to welcome children and provide them the education they need during the health crisis. Ongoing monitoring, including how the proposed measures and their implementation are perceived by the students, teachers, and parents, creates the feedback between the “users” and decision-makers and allows to readjust and convey the appropriate messages to the stakeholders.

While the pandemic has significantly disrupted the teaching process and deepened the inequalities, it has also provided opportunities, such as: modern teaching and learning methods, new ways of communication with children and families, new roles for increasing the general well-being of students.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had an unprecedented impact on the education and learning processes worldwide. At the beginning of April 2020, the closing of schools in 194 countries around the world affected about 1.6 billion students in kindergartens, primary, secondary and high schools, representing 90% of all students in the education system (UNESCO, 2020). For many students, the school year ended at the beginning of March 2020, which means that important parts of the previously planned learning programs have not been completed. The educational approach on the basis of “constructive elements”, according to which new knowledge depends on understanding simpler concepts, passing to higher grades without compensating the knowledge loss would mean that many students will not be able to recover it.

Even before the crisis, students completed an average of 11.2 years of schooling throughout their school life. However, when these years were related to the learning quality, a result of only 7.9 years of schooling was obtained (World Bank Group, 2020). The closing of schools affects negatively the students' learning outcomes (UNESCO, UNICEF, The World Bank and World Food Programme, 2020) and, since many examinations and assessments cannot be completed, it will be difficult to determine the exact amount of losses in academic progress. Recent attempts in this regard show that 5 months of school closure will result in the immediate loss of 0.6 years of quality-adjusted schooling, reducing the effective learning that can be accumulated by students from 7.9 to 7.3 years (World Bank Group, 2020).

Distance learning via the internet, television and other technologies has only partially succeeded in replacing the process that takes place in the school environment. Online learning has become a lifeline for education, as schools tend to minimise the potential virus spread. The countries that have resorted to online learning alternatives have achieved success at different levels, depending on their capabilities. UNESCO has published a specific set of recommendations (Nwokeocha, 2021) planned in order to implement distance learning, but it is hard to imagine that even the most developed countries would respect them all. The real problem is the lack of access to technology or a decent internet connection, which is an obstacle to learning, especially for students from disadvantaged families.

Going to school means more than just going to a place where you learn new things. For many children, schools also provide access to food, the only opportunity to socialise and reduce “screen time”, interact with others and build relationships. Schools are also places where teachers can identify family matters in advance, including domestic violence, health, behavioural problems, and so on, providing support to children at an early stage.

Against the background of uncertainties, there are also rays of hope that can guide us towards the right direction. As many countries are in a similar situation, efforts are being made to address the negative impact of COVID-19. We have the opportunity to learn from each other, to adopt and adapt best practices to the local context, to review relevant policies, standards, approaches, beliefs and priorities to ensure that the necessary measures are undertaken to deal with such situations and prevent further similar crises (World Economic Forum 2020). The governments, donor countries, development agencies,

philanthropic, local stakeholders and others may benefit from the opportunity to turn this crisis into a chance. A failure in this regard would mean that the gap left by COVID-19 in the education process and children development will never be covered.

On March 11, 2020, the Moldovan authorities closed all schools in response to the COVID-19 epidemic. Approximately 434,000 students (National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova, 2020), from the academic institutions at all levels were forced to stay at home, and schools provided distance learning.

The use of information and communication technologies (ICT) to ensure distance learning continuity has become the main priority of the education system in the Republic of Moldova. With an Internet network coverage rate in the Republic of Moldova of about 79.9% in 2019 (E-Government Agency, 2020) (a considerably lower value compared to the 90% rate in the EU in 2019), distance learning has proved to be a difficult task for 16,000 students (4.8% of the total) and 3,000 teachers (10.6% of the total) who do not have access to ICT technology (laptop, tablet or internet access) (National Pupils Council, 2020). This made it impossible to send and receive the tasks (not to mention lessons organisation, the monitoring/evaluation of the learning progress) for a substantial share of students and teachers. The worst affected are families with school-age children who have poor internet connection, for example, those in rural areas (74.5% internet connection versus 86.1% in urban areas), families with incomplete education (64.7% internet connection rate among people with incomplete secondary education compared to 94% among those with higher education) and low-income households (56.7% internet connectivity among those with lower income of 3,000 lei compared to 96.5% in households with incomes over 6,000 lei a month) (E-Government Agency, 2020).

As mentioned above, going to school is much more for children than just a learning opportunity. For children and young people in the Republic of Moldova, it also represents access to food and a chance to socialise with friends. For many children, school feeding programs were an important part of their daily diet. School closures, together with the risk of losing a job by their parents and reduced family income could lead to an increase in malnutrition rates in the country. Before the crisis, it was found that every 8th adolescent was overweight, every 5th was underweight, only half of the adolescents had breakfast, and every 10th never served breakfast (Ministry of Education, Culture and Research, 2020).

As it has been evidenced in the context of the current crisis, the use of ICT can make teachers, students and parents feel overwhelmed, confused and stressed, which can lead to more mental health problems, or a high level of domestic violence. The students may be overcome by homework that they and their families cannot cope with. For parents, children's out-of-school education contributes to increased stress levels, both because they cannot provide their children with the necessary support for learning and the struggle to achieve a balance between the difficulties caused by working remotely, the loss of their jobs and the ongoing care activities. Most children and parents felt stressed and disconnected from their usual support sources and unable to organise both learning and leisure activities at home. Working parents have not been able to help their children reduce their anxiety levels, as they themselves are facing stressful situations, having to manage their work and childcare activities. This is further exacerbated by the lack of policies to regulate distance work. As a result, the incidence of domestic violence and abuse may increase. The experts note that in April 2020, the number of women seeking help in cases of domestic violence increased by 35% compared to March 2021. The Ministry of Education, Culture and Research (MoECR) data show that in the first half of 2020, 3,363 cases of violence against children were reported (a modest number due to the low rate referring to those mentioned by the ministry). The most common form of violence is aggressive behaviour, which is growing steadily. Physical violence accounts for about 40%, and psychological aggression - 27% of cases. Online harassment has become a major problem of distance learning.

To exemplify the above, I propose a short case study of a large high school in Chisinau. Located in an area with a great demographic concentration, only the primary school has 79 teachers and about 1,200 students. The infrastructure consists of 36 classrooms, 3 specialized classrooms, 2 laboratories, 3 medical offices, 1 library and 1 gym with a sports field in the school yard.

The school started the courses in the yellow scenario, which meant the physical presence of all primary school students, as well as the 9th and 12th grade students, the other grades (V–VIII), half of the students being physically present in classes, half learning online from home, on a weekly basis.

The room in which all the students were physically present accommodate 33-34 children each and measure about 0.5-0.8 sq.m. below the minimum physical distance norms allowed in pandemic conditions. The school furniture consists of three rows of two individual desks joined together which were separated by plexiglass panels on two of their sides. Because they were fixed to

the desk sides, the protection provided by them was limited only to the tables, not to the students sitting on the chairs, behind the dividing panels. Therefore, they were totally ineffective. In addition, steaming or soiling prevented good visibility of the blackboard and the teacher, which in the long run could lead to eye problems. Moreover, in some cases their edges were sharp, which could lead to accidents.

The parents could accompany their children only to the school gate, beyond which the children went alone to the classrooms. That place was supervised by bodyguards specially hired for this purpose, but not the route to the classrooms, which was partially supervised with the help of video cameras.

At the end of the lessons, all children were expected by their parents in the same place, regularly creating an agglomeration of adults in that area, often without maintaining minimum protection rules and physical distance.

All these organisational dysfunctions have been summarised in several petitions addressed by the parents to the responsible local authorities, the School Administration Directorate within the City Hall and the Police Inspectorate. However, most parents opted to continue the educational process under the same conditions, preferring to accept the situation out of the desire not to disturb teachers, notifying them of certain organisational deficiencies. In a second-grade poll, following a petition, the teacher told the parents that she was not a supporter of online education; thus, 27 parents voted for “face to face” education suggested by the teacher and only 3 parents voted for the hybrid option, which meant maintaining a proper physical distance between the students. After only 3 days from that survey, the school closed for two weeks due to coronavirus infections, following the red scenario, and the same teacher would declare that... “the inevitable has happened”! An “inevitable” to which she herself contributed by influencing the parents’ choice and a scenario that, in fact, everyone expected.

Later, after two weeks of online lessons, the school re-entered the green scenario (lessons with the physical presence of all children). As the infection rate has decreased in Chisinau (the capital), according to the Chisinau Municipal Council for Emergency Situations decision, all schools in Chisinau have reviewed their activity according to the model chosen at the beginning of the school year, on September 1, 2021.

On the other hand, a study conducted by Reveal Marketing Research in partnership with Kidprenor on the Romanian parents’ perception of children’s education, shows that one third of parents believe that traditional Romanian

education prepares children insufficiently for life and that is why many parents are willing to pay extra for their children's education and development. The main areas of interest in which parents would invest were foreign languages (66%), personal development (public speaking) (58%), individual (52%) and team sports (46%), entrepreneurship (44%) and technology education (42%) (Edelhauser, Lupu-Dima, 2021).

An online platform for schools, *studii.md*, was made available to the public on September 24, 2019. Simpals Company designed the platform with the support and involvement of the United Nations Development Programme and Tekwill. At that time, UNDP's goal was to create a system to help parents track their children's performance through a platform. The platform had all the standard features needed for students – grades, homework, teacher feedback, and could keep the schedule online for up to a year. The system also provides statistics on each student's progress and absences for any given period. Teachers can use it to generate statistical and graphical reports.

In the crisis context, *studii.md* had to be updated quickly in order to respond to the growing needs of the moment. *Studii.md* started its update process by examining the stakeholders' feedback: parents, teachers, and students. The team used the crisis as an opportunity to test and incorporate new and necessary features to the platform, which would support not only remote learning, but also classroom education.

For many parents, managing their children's school activities, connecting to courses, printing homework, submitting it to teachers has been added to the already long list of household chores. A platform that would combine class record, homework and teacher feedback has become a necessity.

Shortly after the decision regarding the adoption of the state of emergency in public health and distance learning, *studii.md* added new features:

- the ability for teachers to upload videos, files, links, new topics and homework,
- the opportunity for students to submit homework,
- video conferencing feature that allows for real-time lessons,
- an e-library, as well as a section with school courses in various subjects,
- a simplified registration process for students and parents, allowing the teachers to connect the students through links,

- automatic calculation of grades and absences, a feature that saves teachers' time. During the quarantine period, the users fill in a required health report which is automatically displayed in the class catalogue,
- progress monitoring for parents by accessing their child's profile, with information about grades, absences and teachers' comments.
- the ability to add comments directly to the uploaded files without downloading them first.

In May 2020, 55 schools across the country were connected to studii.md. 68,375 user accounts were created, which includes about 33,860 parents, 32,000 students and 2,500 teachers. The platform was included in the list of distance learning tools recommended by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Research of the Republic of Moldova.

There are still challenges to the educational system in Moldova, but regardless of the COVID-19 outcome, we are already witnessing a significant advance towards the implementation of digital solutions. A basic platform that compiles information has become a fully functional educational tool that facilitates the lives of thousands of teachers and students.

Conclusions

School closures caused by COVID-19 tend to affect not only the learning process, but also other social issues such as mental health, family violence or social inequalities. The government, civil society and development partners' response has been prompt and decisive, but there are still gaps and challenges. Distance learning experiences have so far provided valuable lessons, including those regarding the importance of rapidly adapting the education system to various realities. The traditional education needs to be adapted and reformed, but the reform process has to include innovation opportunities so that it becomes more open to meeting the current needs of students. The Education Strategy 2030, which is currently being developed, is an excellent opportunity to create a more resilient, operational and efficient education system that is able to respond effectively to crises without disrupting the learning process. The situation can turn into an opportunity to rethink the curriculum, the teaching-learning-assessment processes and to develop students' skills in order to strengthen their online learning skills and support their motivation.

As a result, the decision regarding the partial or total reopening of schools must be guided by:

- A risk-based approach to maximising the educational, developmental and health benefits of the students, teachers, staff and general population helping them to prevent a new COVID-19 outbreak in the community (Twenge, 2018).
- The need to strike the balance between effective student learning, on the one hand, and ensuring the health, hygiene and safety of the students, staff and general population, on the other;
- Focusing the efforts on building a resilient education system for the future that requires a more efficient and better equipped system to deal with potential new crises while being more flexible and agile, thus offering a wider range of alternative learning modalities and technologies for all students so that their studies take place in a safe environment, with adequate support; and
- Focusing the efforts to overcome the gaps (including the digital domain) and focus intensely on flexibility, equity and inclusion, while strengthening risk management capabilities and implementing innovative solutions.

Regarding the online education limits, a survey in this regard (Petrescu, 2020) highlighted 6 major shortcomings:

- 1) pupils/students' relaxation, due to the education carried out at home;
- 2) poor internet connection;
- 3) the lack of necessary devices to carry out online education;
- 4) the poor teachers' training in using digital devices and platforms;
- 5) the large number of pupils/students assigned to a teacher;
- 6) reduced teachers' interest in ensuring quality education.

The COVID-19 pandemic has found the public education system completely unprepared. The private education system reacted and adapted more quickly to the new challenges of online education. The cumbersome public education system, with a greater inertia to the changes, initially preferred to stop the educational process and then asked the teachers to keep courses online. From this moment, the chaos set in: every teacher did how and as much as they could. Without teaching projects and solutions at the national level, some teachers tried to keep the courses online, others sent worksheets, but many enjoyed unexpected vacation (United Nations Moldova, 2016).

Abstract: The paper aims to highlight the problems faced by teachers, students, parents and government bodies of the Republic of Moldova in the school year 2020–2021 in the conditions of the coronavirus pandemic, as well as their management in the general context of the health crisis in this country. The paper highlights good practices, but also the errors that led to an increase in COVID cases and the establishment of restrictions. The documentation on the Republic of Moldova was made on the basis of official reports and information retrieved from the media, as well as from own experiences of the authors in their dual capacity as parents and teachers.

Keywords: education, health, pandemic, political and administrative decisions, Republic of Moldova

Streszczenie: Celem artykułu jest zwrócenie uwagi na problemy, z jakimi borykają się nauczyciele, uczniowie, rodzice i rządy Republiki Mołdawii w roku szkolnym 2020–2021 w warunkach pandemii koronawirusa, a także radzenie sobie z nimi w ogólnym kontekście zdrowia kryzys w tym kraju. W artykule podkreślono dobre praktyki, ale także błędy, które doprowadziły do wzrostu liczby zachorowań i ustanowienia ograniczeń. Dokumentacja dotycząca Republiki Mołdawii została sporządzona na podstawie oficjalnych doniesień i informacji zaczerpniętych z mediów, a także własnych doświadczeń autorów pełniących funkcję rodziców i nauczycieli.

Słowa kluczowe: edukacja, zdrowie, pandemia, decyzje polityczne i administracyjne, Republika Mołdawii

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