

CONDUCTING EDUCATIONAL ACTIVITIES DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT: *Although, unlikely prior to the Covid-19 Pandemic, eLearning has become commonplace in a very short time, even just a few months, for any student in Europe and beyond. Online school represented prior to 2019 an avant-garde concept, to which, teacher and student and especially parents never even thought would become reality so soon. The fact that the education system, sometimes rightly and sometimes wrongly blamed, has succeeded in a short time in adapting to computer-mediated distance learning is a success. In the absence of this alternative, school would have been suspended for 1-2 years, with all the consequences. But under the pandemic threat, both legally and methodologically, the school years were not blocked and generations of pupils followed the course of their lives without the Covid 19 pandemic significantly hindering their development.*

KEY WORDS: *computer, online communication platforms, legislation, law, education, online school.*

JEL CLASSIFICATIONS: *I28.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 Pandemic is now one of the most popular phrases on the planet. Until two years ago, the term “pandemic” was not often used and was surely less known. Humanity in 2019 had no idea what a major health crisis would entail, as the last major medical issues, be they global, were not talked about.

The strategy adopted worldwide, including in our country, was online teaching. As of two years ago, I have been telling my coworkers that in the future, the legislation regarding education will probably establish two types of teaching: full time learning and e-learning, the latter being favored to the traditional one (part-time education, low presence required, night classes or distance education). At the beginning of March, as I am writing this, I can picture the same thing, namely that e-learning, on a certain scale,

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and of a certain percentage will be a form of teaching used mainly for higher education, post-graduate or different types of professional development courses.

Until we get to the post-pandemic lawmaking, let's put aside the role of doctrine as a source of possible law and let us analyze the facts.

In the 2019 global context, the publication of the first information about the virus that emerged in China (Wuhan) caused concerns in the medical field above all, but also in others. However, much of the population living outside of that particular area took the matter lightly, even jokingly. As the spread of the virus became reality for the rest of the planet, Europe and Northern Italy being a great example, the people of this continent started to worry. The end of February 2020 brought the confirmation of the first Covid-19 case in Romania (Prigoria, Gorj County). The public administration and health care system went into maximum alert, the country had an interim government, and the local elections were coming up (which would later get postponed), and the educational system was faced with an unprecedented issue. Almost everywhere in Europe classes were being suspended, and the online meetings used before by big companies were now enforced in schools, especially in urban areas.

In March of 2020 the educational system in Romania decided to stop teaching activities, and due to the lack of official decisions and a definite view on the Pandemic, Romania starts following the lead of Europe. At the beginning, the first schools to start e-learning were from urban areas, while any form of electronic communication, especially electronic mail became means of communication for teaching. Starting with the 2020-2021 school year, on-line teaching became wide spread, and the term itself (on-line) went from being a barely used neologism to being rightfully used by our old and weary grandparents.

The world had changed and the field of education was no exception. At a legislative level, measures were being taken in order to adapt to the new context. The government was legislating emergency orders so that the necessary norms could be enforced as soon as possible. The Ministry of Health had the most intense activity, followed by the Ministry of National Education. There were new acts being issued (orders from the ministry), regulations and methodologies, due to the fact that from a legal and administrative standpoint, proper conditions had to be created for conducting new types of activities, within the framework of communication based on economic means, for an unknown timeframe.

At first, there was optimism when looking at the topic of education: the people involved, pupils/students, parents, teachers and the authorities thought they faced a problem that would maybe take a few weeks to solve. Then e-learning was thought to end in our country at its one-year anniversary, but, at least for university education, it took two years for it to stop.

At the start of the Pandemic, the Ministry of Education and other educational establishments, including universities, adapted their methodology regarding teaching, including those for evaluation, so that in person meetings such be conducted under safety conditions, while maintaining physical distance, wearing masks, using disinfectants and regularly airing the rooms. These measures, however, were not enough, so new regulations created the possibility for online teaching. New online platforms were being created or old ones were being accessed, and the number of their users skyrocketed.

2. ONLINE TEACHING: ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES

Advantages:

- wide addressability - a greater number of students can participate in the classes taught through online platforms
- reduced expenses- no financial efforts other than electricity consumption, acquiring electronic devices and access to internet
- a lower number of teachers – a single teacher can come before countless pupils/students and teach the same class/course, as needed
- accessibility - going to school or university is no longer necessary. The beneficiary of the educational process can log in from anywhere to a terminal capable of accessing the platform/application, without the need to physically be in a classroom.
- multiple listeners - while a classroom, only the pupils/students and a few other people are allowed to attend, with e-learning other people that are interested: parents, friends can take part in classes in a similar manner to those already connected.
- feedback - of course this can also be achieved during in-person teaching, but while participating on-line, the student can avoid the emotions that come with exposure. Being behind a screen, one will not experience the pressure or influence of one's peers.

Disadvantages:

- focusing - the ability of catching the listener's attention is minimal. This is most true in the case of preschool, primary and secondary education, as the percentage of children's ability of paying attention is very low.
- issues regarding grading - evaluating students implies a higher degree of subjectivity. Anyone can use all kinds of means or external help while being evaluated, all of this not being apparent to the teacher.
- the efficiency of teaching - due to lack of direct contact, physically being in a classroom surrounded by people, the education process suffers considerably. Under no circumstances will the students bond with the school, the teachers or anything related to in-person teaching.
- the disappearance of collegiality - bonds between classmates are created in school through physical and direct collaboration between pupils or students, as the case may be. They attend classes together, go on breaks or other activities outside of school together, thus they bond, joke around or become enemies in all sorts of competitions, either organized or spontaneous. All these connections lead to friendships, oftentimes lasting a lifetime.
- the inefficiency of the actual educational process - though I am not aware of any actual studies followed by competitions being done for me to examine their attested results, there still is a belief that e-teaching is markedly inferior to in-person teaching. Actually, society has realized the impossibility of fixing these issues, and others not mentioned here, regarding education, most of all in the case of primary and secondary education students.

3. TECHNICAL CONDITIONS

Even before the pandemic hit, classrooms in Romania, either used for pre-university or university education, had started to be equipped with technology that would aid the education process. Some of the electronic means of teaching were: computers, projectors, or other strictly technical features for fields like: biology, medicine, engineering, and so on. I would dare say that, in spite of everything that happened (the closing of schools and universities for almost 2 years), the educational system had the ability to react. Throughout history, usually due to societal reasons (wars, riots) or natural occurrences, the world was forced to interrupt teaching. But this time, e-learning was our saving grace, which allowed us to continue our activities, thus avoiding an educational blockage that would have caused a chain effect through generations.

We can all agree that online schooling has its limitations and the quality of education, as experienced by the beneficiaries, is inferior to that of in-person teaching and increases as we look at the lower grades. If for university or high school students, lessons thought via computers fulfil a significant number of parameters, for university and especially master students' attendance was higher, in the case of secondary or primary school students, educational objectives were harder to reach. For preschool education, without invoking arguments, which are well known, online education is not and will not be a serious alternative.

To continue my point, by using pre-pandemic electronic means, a first step had been taken towards the use of technology in the teacher-student educational relationship. Both teaching staff and pupils or students had had some contact with an educational form reliant on electronic devices. What was new was the use of online meeting platforms. If until 2019, only people working in IT were heard here, talking about their computer meetings held from home or from any location other than the company's premises, since the spring of that year and especially since the autumn of that year, all pupils and students, together with teachers, started to install such platforms on personal computers or phones.

For some of Romania's young people, this was also a challenge, as a significant number of students did not have an electronic device at the time. With the involvement of the authorities, volunteers, schools or simply by appealing to friends and family, the problem was overcome in the first months of the pandemic, so that at the end of the fifth wave of the pandemic and the resumption of in-person activity, without exception, a trace of regret seemed to be identified, due to the cessation of the convenience of attending classes from anywhere: from their home armchair, from beneath the shade of a tree in the yard, from the beach, from the park or from the mall!

Romania adapted quickly and overcame the pandemic period; there was no need for "academic freeze", and the number of courses requiring catch-up was relatively small, with catch-ups taking place without extending school years.

Following a survey, published under the heading of the Romanian Students' Council, entitled "*Percepții despre calitatea educației online*" ("Opinions on the quality of online education"), it is stated that at the end of 2020, i.e. less than one year after the start of the pandemic in our country, more than 70% of students were carrying out school activities (cdn.edupedu.ro) online, which confirms, despite the many criticisms of the

local education system, the possibility of adapting to new school methods, almost completely unused 12 months ago.

This time, the computer, similar to a boat in medieval times, has helped the school cross through times of restrictions that would otherwise have inevitably led to the indefinite suspension of classes. I strongly emphasize that it was the online communication platforms that formed the core of the solution, and this system will form the basis for a new form of education in the future, under certain conditions, as we shall all see for ourselves.

Adapting on the fly also led to the identification and use of a hybrid solution: conducting classes in classrooms, with only part of the pupils/students physically present, and the other part opting for online participation, via audio-video systems installed in the classroom, connected to communication platforms, so that the online participants are in direct contact with the class/group while going through the assignments.

4. ATTITUDES TOWARDS ONLINE TEACHING

From the outset, a whole range of individuals have taken one position or another on the possibility of teaching lessons by computer, using apps. At first, in principle, this method was not viewed with reluctance, and it was eventually greeted with great curiosity, the concerns regarding the many unknown effects of the virus newly-emerged and highly covered by the media being the priority.

- *of the students*

The direct beneficiaries (pupils, students, other learners), although reluctant at first, seem to be the category that has quickly adjusted to the new way of schooling. Most of the young generation is already familiar with computers, phones or other types of gadgets, thusly they have not had much difficulty in adapting, even though most of them had never worked on a platform exclusively for teaching purposes.

Not all young people in Romania, as in almost every country, had a computer or a phone capable of supporting the applications used in the teaching process, but through the involvement of schools, the Ministry, the family and society in general, the problem was solved. Although, in terms of effectiveness, the younger the target group, the more difficult it was for them to learn skills using online teaching methods, they were nevertheless involved in the teaching process using only remote technical means and adapted well to this new way of teaching.

- *of the teachers*

Initially, teachers were reluctant to accept the new way of conducting classes. If for those in the IT field, this type of education was not a problem, even if they had not used it directly, for other teachers, especially those in the second part of their careers, the new educational system based on online classes seemed almost impossible to enforce. By appealing to younger people, including pupils, even retired teachers still in service were able to work and practice with pupils or students on planned assignments without being physically present, relying only on the computer.

- *of the parents/guardians*

Many parents have been in different positions since the very beginning of online teaching. A large part accepted this possibility as a short-term solution for the time being, but the extension of online schooling led to insistent demands to stop the new way of working with pupils. There were also parents who, from the beginning, were opposed to online schooling, arguing that it was not useful, especially for young children, and recommending that school be suspended until it was possible to resume in-person classes. However, some parents found online teaching an acceptable solution, perhaps also for material reasons: young people (especially university students) would stay at home, without having to travel to towns hundreds of kilometers away, where the costs would be much higher.

As online schooling was going on and on, more and more parents repeatedly called for the resumption of classes in a physical format, so that young people didn't lose touch with school in the way society was used to perceive it. Moreover, the practical outcomes were also beginning to be seen, with pupils' preparation being inferior to that of the past, i.e. before the pandemic began.

- *of the authorities*

For the authorities, the pandemic meant a whole series of challenges never faced before by the current generation. Nobody in the working population had encountered policies restricting subjective human rights on a major scale for health reasons: restricting access to hospitals, quarantining, isolation, and supplying the population were truly new situations that were the responsibility of the authorities, for many of which not even a legal framework had been developed. In education, the public authorities were more concerned with providing electronic means (computers and internet access) so that all children could participate in online classes.

At the beginning of autumn 2021, i.e. a year and a half after the start of the pandemic in our country, the Minister of Education pointed out the shortcomings in many aspects of online schooling. Thus, he highlighted: the lack of general internet connection, the lack of computer equipment (terminals), tablets, etc. for a large number of pupils, the lack of digital content (textbooks), the existence of a significant number of teachers who were not prepared for online teaching, as well as the lack of educational platforms designed to replace, as far as possible, in person schooling (www.digi24.ro).

- *of society in general*

Romanian society, usually polarized in many directions, was no different this time around. First, after the onset of the pandemic in Romania (February 2020), a large part of society demanded the suspension of classes, while an equally large part did not consider such a solution feasible.

After the online teaching activity had been prolonged on several occasions, once again the Romanian society reacted differently: one part asked for the resumption of in person classes motivated by the primary interest of the child's education, to the detriment of the health one, while the same number of people argued that maintaining online schooling was based on health safety, to the detriment of the educational interests. It was indeed a difficult choice and depending on the context, we believe that it was decided as it should have been, each time.

5. OUTLOOKS ON E-LEARNING

At the end of the state of emergency, the state of alert (a situation not expressly regulated in basic law) was established socially, as opposed to the state of emergency. In both the first and the second situations, there was the legal framework for online classes, but since the alert status was also lifted and the legislation in force at that time expired, the general legislative framework in the field of education has been left without clauses in this regard. A legislative void as we can call it today, although regulations on education through electronic means based on distance communication did not exist before 2020 either.

Also, at the beginning of the state of emergency, the future of education, of schooling in general, was regarded with skepticism, but skepticism, as the scholar of philosophy and law says, "must be limited to instrumental knowledge and not extended to what-is" (Dănișor, 2006). Skepticism, though justified, was overcome by prompting factors regarding the continuation of schooling, in its online, internet-mediated version.

The transition from in-person to virtual schooling in the familiar pandemic context also required compromise. But man is capable of compromise, and has done so many times throughout history, with varying consequences. As Jung points out, "The persona ... is a compromise between individual and society as to what a man should appear to be" (www.digi24.ro).

At the onset of the pandemic, urgent and firm solutions had to be adopted. At first, schools were closed, with health safety taking precedence over the right to education, which was thus restricted for the first time in a very long time. The alternatives were: resuming school in an in-person format, although the number of infected people was increasing exponentially, the health system seemed to be suffocated and treatment was not available, resuming school in an online format, and suspending school for an unlimited period. The option of online schooling was chosen, knowing from the outset that it had its limits and that the level of knowledge or skills would be diminished, but it was more of a time-limited suspension of schooling in general.

In the absence of a legislative framework, all educational institutions, including universities, as autonomous institutions, reverted to the traditional system of teaching based on physical presence. This time, there was some, hardly anticipated, opposition to returning (to the classrooms). First, on the managerial level, the academic institutions asked for a period of transition, as administratively they were not ready for the opening of campuses to full occupancy. Student dormitories had not been functioning for a couple of years or were operating at reduced capacity, so were the canteens, and the situation of the military conflict in Ukraine attracted new requests for availability for centers with accommodation capacity to house possible refugees from the war zone.

Then, some students, individually or through student organizations, requested the extension of online teaching at least until the end of the current academic year. The request was not without echo, in the sense that it was decided at the central level that in the coming period, normative initiatives would be drafted and submitted to create the legal framework to conduct online courses, certainly only under certain conditions.

From a legal point of view, a law or an ordinance issued by the Government is needed, an administrative act with legal force close to a law, which would constitute framework legislation for the organization of e-schooling in the future. I remain of the opinion that once the state of alert was over, the lack of a general legal framework led to the abandonment of the pandemic-specific method of education, and the problem could not be resolved by a ministerial order or the decision of a rector, as these administrative acts lacked legislative support. It is no less true that the Government can quickly create the general framework using an emergency ordinance, which can be adopted by the Government, including at the initiative of the relevant ministry (Ministry of Education), and published in the Official Gazette, with immediate legal effect.

Also, the option of legislative changes by Parliament, although not as fast, but with increased efficiency would be indicated. The increased efficiency is given by the fact that, while government ordinances need to be confirmed by Parliament, once the law on the creation of the framework for the operation of e-schooling would enter into force, no other impediment would exist, as the implementing rules issued by the Government, by a decision given in this respect, would not change the substance of the regulation, but would only indicate the way forward in the application of the law. Such an organic law may be initiated: either by the Government in the form of a bill, or by parliamentarians in the form of a legislative proposal, or by the citizens with the right to vote, numbering at least one hundred thousand, provided that other administrative conditions are met.

I have stated on various occasions that in the future there will be only two forms of education in Romania: in-person learning and online education, with some reciprocity, in the sense that some activities in the second form stated above will be found in the first one and vice versa. As far as compulsory general education is concerned, the first form of education should remain the only educational solution, except for specific times: states of siege, war, or emergency, while in the case of university education, both forms of education can coexist.

One of the advantages of online schooling would be that it allows personalities in any field, from anywhere in the world, to address students directly in any university. Of course, this advantage generated by technology should not and will not lead to a decrease in the contribution of traditional education, but on the contrary, the pandemic period has shown the limitations of online schooling, a fact confirmed almost unanimously today by the parents of students who have had to work in front of the computer and with all the limitations generated by this type of teaching-learning.

6. CONCLUSIONS

Without the Covid-19 Pandemic, we probably wouldn't have had mass online schooling activity this soon. Even if technically accessible, to a very high percentage, students had not, until the early months of 2020, ever participated in lessons conducted via IT applications, and teachers had not ever used communication platforms for live lessons/lectures.

Nowadays, online courses seem so simple; it appears to have been so easy that everyone wonders when they will be carried out again, without necessarily waiting for health or social reasons that force the population in the schooling system to a form of communication other than that which requires physical presence. It is habit that guides human behavior. In the beginning, people seemed to be unaccustomed to computer classes. It was hard to set up the applications, then the connection, finally making the linked audio and video systems work, and so on. In the end, it all seemed to go so smoothly that the initial absolute exception had become, by degrees, the everyday normal.

It may be that online schooling is not the best way to learn, but if this educational opportunity didn't exist, what would we have been doing for 2 years? Would we have used correspondence, or would we have frozen school work, or perhaps public TV stations would have organized lessons via TV? Either of these options would have meant a possibility of substituting people's presence in schools.

From now on, the alternative of lessons using computer technology will be a reality and a possibility within reach. Certainly, the educational process, as we have already anticipated, will also make room for online activities in the future, depending on several criteria. Either at the initiative of the Government or the Parliament, the method of online teaching will be included in the legislation governing education in the future. Certainly, there will be certain conditions regarding the use of platforms for purely educational purposes, and future generations, as well as present ones, will learn to a certain extent online. Whether it is for theoretical training or for training or development of skills, in the future the computer will mediate communication between teacher and pupil/student or any learner as the case may be.

The duration of online classes was usually somewhat shorter, due to a combination of factors, including the conference limit set at the level of some applications. Another reason was certainly the limitation of time spent in front of the computer by students. Indeed, the six hours a day, plus a few more that the student spent on the computer or phone as the case may be, led to a long period, day after day, of direct contact with the computer, to the detriment of all other activities. For that reason, reducing the length of online lessons was a fair measure.

Online school has its limits. As far as practical activities or physical education classes are concerned, team sports have no chance of being practiced. For these kind of activities, conducting them in person is the only solution.

Unfortunately, for health care reasons, for the first time in a very long time, the schools were closed; fortunately, technology and individual facilities allowed online communication. It wasn't an ideal solution, but it was handy and it worked. Thanks are due to those who created the computers, the internet and the specific applications, and to those who first had the idea of switching to online activity.

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