

# **Educational Policies and Social Responsibility in Education during the Covid-19 Crisis: Three case studies of Romania, Greece, and Ukraine**

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## INTRODUCTION

The present casebook comprises of three qualitative research-based studies that were conceived as part of the project *CitEdEV Project, Citizenship Education in the Context of European Values*, Jean Monnet Network 621298-EPP-1-2020-1-CZ-EPPJMO-NETWORK, 2020 – 2024, coordinated by Charles University, Prague. The research was carried-out in three countries - Romania, Greece, and Ukraine, and explored the manner in which educational policies were adapted in response to the Covid-19 pandemic crises. Analysis has focus on how the teachers, students, and parents adapted to policy developments, and what that meant in terms of social responsibility.

The studies are the contribution of the following researchers: Monica Oprescu, Lecturer, Teacher Training Department, West University of Timișoara, Romania; Kostis Tsioumis, Professor, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece; Maria Karadimou, Postdoctoral Researcher, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece; Konstantina Iliopoulou, EDIP, Aristotle University Thessaloniki, Greece; Olena Bondarchuk, Professor, Head of the Department of Management Psychology, Central Institute of Post-Graduate Education, University of Educational Management, NAES of Ukraine; Irina Bondarevskaya, Head of Board, NGO Centre for Personal and Social Transformations, Ukraine, and NCCR-on-the-move Senior Researcher, Laboratory of Social Psychology, Institute of Psychology, University of Lausanne, Switzerland.

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# **EDUCATIONAL POLICIES AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY IN EDUCATION DURING THE COVID-19 CRISIS. THE CASE OF ROMANIA**

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## **Abstract**

The disruption of education, caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, has been considered the biggest in history, affecting huge numbers of children and young people, increasing inequalities, and affecting disadvantages groups, but at the same time leading to innovation and the rapid digitisation of education systems. This chapter analyses educational policies in Romania during the first year of the pandemic, followed by presentation of a small qualitative case-study carried-out with teachers in Timișoara, Romania, and its environs.

## **The global Covid-19 crises and education**

The Covid-19 pandemic caused “the largest disruption of education systems in history, affecting nearly 1.6 billion learners in more than 190 countries and all continents” (see *United Nations Policy Brief: Education during Covid-19 and beyond*. August 2020). The closure of schools impacted 94% of the school population, almost 99% in low- and middle-income countries (*ibid*). As a consequence, pre-existing education disparities were exacerbated and there were unequal solutions for learning that could create long-term inequities.

On a positive note, it may be argued that the crisis led to innovation and change in educational systems and the idea of leaving no one behind was adopted. However, as education turned to the digital environment and distance learning (in high-income countries 80 to 85% of the student population was affected, the figure being 50% in low-income countries) the importance of home resources and parental involvement became an increasingly important aspects of the period. Blaskó and Schnepf’s (2020) study focused on the effects on children of the physical closure of schools (around 58 million primary and secondary school children), in European

countries, starting in March 2020. The differences in educational outcomes by socio-economic background were exacerbated, as children with lower-educated parents were more negatively affected (the existing literature showed the importance of the home environment in children's school performance), thus explaining the disadvantaged children's lower school performance. To this, limited access to resources was added: internet access, computer / tablet; a place to study during lockdown; reading opportunities; lack of adequate nutrition (previously received at school); and parental involvement in children's development.

Besides the serious changes in education and the rise in educational inequalities, the period posed a serious threat to democracy (see *Making the Right to Education a Reality in Times of Covid-19. A Roadmap for Action on the Council of Europe education response to COVID-19*. October 2020). The first right that was under threat was exactly the right to education, a right enshrined in *The European convention on Human Rights and The European Social Charter*.

The rising educational inequalities, especially in the case of vulnerable students, children with special needs from less advantaged backgrounds, with less digital resources, with a less suitable learning environment, with less support from parents were several negative aspects of the educational crisis (Di Pietro et al. 2020). The discrepancies between schools were also noted, contributing to these inequalities: students attending schools with CT-based infrastructure (e.g. Virtual Learning Environment) and teachers with higher levels of digital skills, were advantaged. Consequences for the future are also worth considering, in that "Several studies find that children's cognitive and socio-emotional skill levels are good predictors of later outcomes. Students poorly endowed with these skills tend to have lower educational attainment and poorer labour market prospects, in terms of both employment and pay rates. Therefore, there is the risk that, in the absence of appropriate policy measures, the short-term inequality caused by COVID-19 may persist or even grow over time, leading to more economic disparity in the future." (Di Pietro *et al.* 2020, pp. 4-5).

## **Educational Policies during the Covid-19 Crisis for the period March 2020 – June 2021, in the Romanian Educational System at Pre-University Level**

## **Operation of schools: March 2020 – June 2021. Public documents of the Ministry of Education**

In Romania, the Covid 19 pandemic crisis led to the closure of face-to-face learning and teaching in all learning institutions at pre-university level (see the *Decision nb. 7/11.03.2020* of Comitetul Național pentru Situații Speciale de Urgență / National Committee for Special Emergency Situations). The period was initially from the 11<sup>th</sup> of March to the 22<sup>nd</sup> of March 2020, being prolonged through later decisions. At this point the Ministry of Education encouraged the realisation of online support courses (see *Adresa MEC nb. 79/10.03.2020*).

A series of documents were issued by the Ministry of Education and Research, regulating the activities during the pandemic period. The first one, *Order nb. 4.135/21.04.2020* referred to the continuity of the educational process at pre-university level. At this point a series of resources for online education was put forth by the Ministry of Education for teachers, students, and parents. The digital portal [www.educred.ro](http://www.educred.ro) shared open educational resources and also tutorials for supporting teachers in the online educational process. It was also stated that evaluation could be done online. It was decided that School Inspectorates, working together with schools and local authorities, will identify solutions for assuring the technical equipment needed and also for the internet connection of schools. A weekly online plan for educational activities was to be done by teachers, for every school subject. The evaluation after the online period could result in a grade. Moreover, schools were to propose recovery plans and remedial learning for students for the period of suspended face-to-face learning, for those who could not take part (for objective reasons) in online courses.

In a press release [*Ministerul Educației și Cercetării anunță măsurile luate în sistemul românesc de învățământ, în contextul pandemiei Covid-19 / The Ministry of Education announces the measures taken in the Romanian educational system in the context of Covid-19 pandemic*”, 27<sup>th</sup> of April 2020] it was announced that face-to-face courses will remain suspended, and learning assisted by technology will continue till the end of the school year. Only final year students (8<sup>th</sup> grade and 12<sup>th</sup> grade) were allowed to have face-to-face courses as preparation for exams.

The necessary organisation activities in order to prevent the infection with the SARSCoV-2 virus were stated through another document, *Order nb. 5.487/1.494 / 2020*, which was a

common decision of both the Education Ministry and the Ministry of Health. The document stated three possible scenarios for school openings, according to the Covid-19 incidence rate:

Scenario 1: in which all pre-university students participated in face-to-face learning with the necessary measures being taken;

Scenario 2: which referred to the participation of primary school children and only 8<sup>th</sup> grade and 12<sup>th</sup> grade classes in face-to-face classes, the others switching to online instruction;

Scenario 3: in which all students were in online education. Starting with the 14th of September 2021 these were the possibilities for school functioning, according to the epidemiological situation communicated by the local DSP / Direction of Public Health.

*Order nb. 5.545/10.09.2020* provided the methodology necessary for the online didactic activities before the beginning of the new school year and epidemiological measures were instated: hygiene, disinfection, wearing the protection mask, limited contact between students from different classes, assuring a minimum distance between students or separating shields, keeping parents informed about the epidemiological situation of the school and the isolation of students at home in case of symptoms. Also, the document had a special part that referred to GDPR, due to the specific of online activities and ways in which students would be protected.

The specific principles that govern education were stated in the document: equity, quality, decentralization, assuring equality of chances, student centred education, participation, and parents' responsibilities. Regarding the organisation of school activities, responsibilities were delegated towards schools which were supposed to find economic partners for solutions in order to support the process of online learning. The duties and responsibilities of all parties involved – institutions, teachers, students, and parents were stipulated. There was also a more concrete part which referred to the planning of activities and to didactic materials, including feedback. For disadvantaged communities it was recommended that schools and teachers find alternative solutions for children with no access to the internet or technology and to transmit personalized tasks / materials in an adapted manner. Evaluation was also mentioned, in the form of marks and qualifications.

School courses were again suspended between 9.12.2020 - 23.12.2020, through *Order nb. 6122/2020 from the 7<sup>th</sup> of December 2020* and the suspension continued from 11.01.2021 - 29.01.2021 through *Order nb. 3090/2021 from the 8<sup>th</sup> of January 2021*.

*Order nb. 3.235 from the 4<sup>th</sup> of February 2021* of the Ministry of Education and *Order nb. 93 from the 4<sup>th</sup> of February 2021* of the Health Ministry stated again the possibility of students at pre-university level to go back to schools according to the three scenarios, according to the Covid-19 incidence rate:

Scenario 1: participation of all students in face-to-face schooling;

Scenario 2 - everyday participation of students in face-to-face learning of students in primary level and exam classes 8<sup>th</sup>, 12<sup>th</sup>, 13<sup>th</sup> and all other classes in online activity;

Scenario 3 - primary school students in face-to-face schooling and all the other classes in online.

As a final step, *Order nb. 3.459/280/6.03.2021* established changes in school activities, which were reorganised every Friday, according to incidence rates. In May 2021, after the Easter holiday, all schools went back to face-to-face learning.

### **General aspects of education during the remote distance education of the school year 2020-2021**

There were two main studies done for the period concerning the changes in the educational year 2020-2021, including both quantitative and qualitative analysis. The first one offers a broader perspective through a quantitative study that contains the results to an online questionnaire for 518 families in Romania (one child, one parent in each family), but only for spring 2020 (Velicu (2020)). The second study, Velicu (2021), is a Joint Research Centre technical report of the European Commission's science and knowledge service, which involved a small-scale research done on 29 semi-structured interviews with Romanian stakeholders (school staff, students, parents, NGO representatives), conducted between March and April 2021. Similar studies were conducted in other countries, as well: Denmark, Estonia, Hungary, and Spain. Results highlighted several important aspects: the infrastructure used, teachers' training possibilities and pedagogical practices, the relationship with students in the online

environment, the possibilities of student engagement, risks, and opportunities of the remote education during the pandemic.

Regarding the infrastructure needed for the remote distance learning period, device availability was one of the issues, mainly for students, but for some teachers, as well. Educational platforms (Google classroom and Microsoft teams) were introduced and used.

Several programmes for training parents for using the devices were implemented by NGO's. Teachers were offered webinars for training them into using the different platforms and applications. There were also discussions on digital content creation, which was not new for some teachers. The adaptation of teachers to the new online environment proved to be just "a translation of the old pedagogical practices into the new online environment" (Velicu 2021, 12), synchronous educational activities being mostly used by teachers. Evaluation and the engagement of students were important issues which caused problems, teachers trying to find ways to prevent cheating, to offer objective assessment and to engage students. Summative evaluation and the use of multimodal activities proved to be effective.

The risks identified during this period were: the lack of control of the classes, cyberbullying, privacy issues in the online environment and the pressure of being always on. There were benefits, as well: all materials being uploaded on a platform, the development of digital skills, both for students and for teachers, time saved and silence in class, as there was less disruption. The problem of the disadvantaged students was one of the most stringent. In 2019, 35.8% of Romanian children were at risk of poverty or social exclusion (Eurostat, 2020). These children had problems accessing online education due to the lack of equipment, lack of electricity or internet, lack of skills. One of the interviewed teachers said: "The online schooling sounds great from the Ministry office, but it is not a solution for these children." (I7, primary school teacher)" (Velicu 2021, 25).

The benefits of the period were the fact that digital skills were developed, and teachers uploaded all their materials on a platform, which made them always available, saving time. There was also more engagement for students with health problems. The potential of this crisis situation was seen in several aspects: the improvement of the digital skills and a further digitisation for Romanian education. Some directions to be considered regarding improvement referred to a better collaboration between teachers; centralised and curated platforms, with digital



educational content; improvement of teachers' digital skills and clear and strict regulations for the online educational process.

## **Case-study of teachers at secondary school level in Timișoara, Romania**

Starting from these premises, a case-study was designed, inquiring into the social responsibility of all actors involved: teachers, students and also parents (through the teachers' perspective). It was a small-scale research, done in Timișoara, in the period December - April 2022. It comprised 3 small scale focus groups with teachers of different humanistic specialisations (Romanian language, English, History and Civic Education): Focus group 1: 6 teachers, Focus group 2: 3 teachers, Focus group 3: 5 teachers of humanistic / social sciences. The teachers were employed at lower and higher secondary school level (only English teachers taught at a primary school level, as well), in urban and rural areas, in and near Timișoara, involving teachers at beginner and senior levels.

The following topics were identified and debated with the participants and the results will be discussed, as follows.

### **Roles of the teachers, teaching online and the use of technology. Advantages and disadvantages of online learning**

Participants stated that during the pandemic, teachers had to develop new skills, to learn how to use the new technologies. Their role was extended from transmitting information and also developing linguistic competences (specific for language teachers). The advantages of the period were related to technology: the fact that teachers learnt how to work with educational software, the educational platforms and also the many resources that could be used directly in teaching. *"Everything was available with a click"*, stated one of the teachers (T3Ro), emphasizing the availability of technology, easier to be used from home than from school. It was also a process during which teachers learnt from the children, as many were more up to date with technology, so the process went both ways more than before. One of the teachers added:

*“I could show the students what in a classical class I couldn’t, because I had a calculator, a video projector, a laptop, a smart tablet and so on, and this had a long-term effect because even after we came back face-to-face, I used the same methods and interactive games, and they were more interested in the class.” (T9Ro).*

This was mentioned by several teachers, who acknowledged the fact that they could motivate the students with video resources, and they continued after the return to face-to-face classes, and they also built up a database of video materials they could use in the face-to-face lessons, as well. And also, the digitisation of the schools, which was done during the pandemic, contributed to the technological development during the period. There was also the question of teacher training, more specifically the lack of training of teachers in the area of online instruments and technology. Therefore, the respondents considered that the roles of teachers have become more complex, including the area of digital skills and the use of technology.

Communication was different, the period also contributed to students getting involved more with many of their classmates, to communicating with colleagues they did not have a connection with before:

*“They speak with their desk-mate all the time, whereas when they were in breakout rooms, they had to work with who was there and that was a nice part.” (T4Ro).*

Some of the inspections specific for the teaching profession were also held online and many issues to be dealt with came up.

The disadvantages mentioned were of a logistic manner: some children did not have internet access, did not have laptops or tablets. That was the situation especially in rural areas, and some of the respondent teachers worked in rural school during the pandemic and they acknowledged the problem. To this was added the fact that only motivated and interested students participated in class. The students who were at a medium level or below, lost interest and it was difficult to keep them motivated. It was also difficult for teachers to get feedback from students and to evaluate them. Another aspect was that of control (regarding both discipline and content), as students could easily disregard the class without any immediate and possible consequence. One of the teachers confessed her frustration:

*“And yes, the word was frustration - I was overwhelmed many times. Sometimes I felt useless and many times I wondered: is there any point in what I am doing, in what I am saying?” (T9Ro)*

### **Relationship with parents and parents’ responsibilities**

Regarding the relationship with parents, the participants in the focus groups considered there was more transparency related to teaching in this period, as parents could actually see what happened in class, they got to know the teachers better and it built trust. This was especially the case of primary school teachers, language teachers (English in this case) working with this age group, as well. Counselling parents was also part of the process, towards a closer relationship, as interested parents communicated with teachers every day, asking all sorts of details about their children’s activities, which did not happen when they were at school. Everything became more personal, as teachers communicated with both parents (if they were head-teachers) and with students on a communication platform (WhatsApp). Therefore, all teachers considered the important role of the parents, especially for primary school children, as parents wanted to support their children and this was an effort, as sometimes they had that task during their own work hours:

*“parents had a very important role online to support the children, to make them understand that these are the conditions and maybe to explain some behaviour rules in the online environment” (T3Ro).*

There was also a disadvantage encountered by teachers, due to the fact that many people helped their children in an unfair manner, by being behind the screen and always providing them with the correct answer. Also, the question of evaluation, closely connected with parents, was part of the process, as at the beginning of the pandemic parents were asked for their agreement on their children receiving marks, which they voted against (in these specific cases) and which made evaluation an issue during the online period.

### **Problems of disadvantaged groups**

The social inequalities during the pandemic were accentuated. There was mainly the issue of students in rural areas, who had greater problems in terms of internet connection and technology to access it. But, in time, children received tablets and they could join online classes.

A rural schoolteachers explained the difficulties in working during this distance learning period, before receiving the tablets and gave an example:

*“[We] made worksheets which were sent to the headmaster who printed them and sent them to the children who did not have internet access or technology and they were returned another day to the school, scanned and the teachers received them”.* (T2Ro)

There was also the difficulty of working with children with special needs, who did not have the patience to sit in front of the computer for many hours and who were deprived of the special educational help they needed during the pandemic. One of the teachers mentioned that they managed better during the pandemic, because they were motivated by different films used in teaching and also the tasks were lower level, so they were easier to manage.

The advantage of students in urban areas was obvious, due to the access and resources and also due to the teachers who were also better trained and had the knowledge and technology to make it work. Overall *“it was a good experience, as it was seen it could be done in a different way”*, which could be used nowadays, as well, *“in case something does not work we could switch to online, as well.”* said one of the teachers” (T6Ro).

### **Reaction of institutions**

There was an emphasis on the fact that at first teachers used their own tools, then schools paid for subscriptions to use educational platforms. There was also the question mentioned earlier of internet access and technology especially of children in rural areas and those belonging to disadvantaged groups. One of the teachers concluded that institutions reacted extremely well, in about a month from the start of the pandemic all schools went online and that:

*“overall, it was an extraordinary period with exemplary mobilization from all: parents, teachers, institutions”* (T1Ro).

### **Responsibilities of students**

At first, the approach of the students regarding the distance schooling approach was game-like. They were also focussed on the extra work because they had to participate online and post their work on platforms afterwards, as well. As a general observation, teachers observed that older students (upper secondary school and high school) lacked dynamism. Also, a unanimous

opinion was that they had less responsibilities, they only had to connect on Google Meet and pay attention, which actually did not always happen.

### **Consequences: what is left after this period**

Technology seems to be the greatest gain of the period: the use of educational platforms and learning apps and also the fact that schools have been updated with technology that they can use nowadays, as well. The need for the use of technology in the digital environment produced a change:

*“the pandemic forced us to update ourselves as teachers and forced the students to use their everyday technology for school” (T1Ro).*

One of the respondents acknowledges the use of technology in school; teachers who were trained to use technology; then also a positive outcome being the students’ getting used to speak in front of a camera, which could help them in their future jobs (T6Ro). Also, teachers considered the online meetings to be helpful, kept after the pandemic and distance period was over, as they saved time and offered comfort.

The period taught students to become more responsible, to be able to search for their own correct variants, not wait for everything from the teacher. It also forced children to become more independent, to assume responsibility and the teachers to show them options, to teach them to manage their own learning. But there were teachers who also considered the negative impact of the period and the total online schooling being perceived as trauma:

*“my students have a reticence toward online learning; they remained with some trauma. They would not get back online.” (T4Ro).*

### **Conclusions**

The international reports, the national studies and the case-study presented in this chapter all strengthen the same ideas and lead to the same conclusions regarding both the negative and positive aspects of the pandemic period. Regarding the period as one of disruption and change, the main issue has been that of the disadvantaged children who did not have access to devices and internet. At the same time, the main benefit of the experience was the development of digital skills. These have been also confirmed by the results of the case-study, which has added

some additional aspects regarding the period. The lack of technological resources at the beginning has been countered by the reactions of the institutions which responded and adapted, and children were enabled with access to devices to be used for online education. At the same time, the involvement of parents (especially at primary school level) and the adaptation of some of the children with special educational needs, who reacted better during online activities, were positive aspects. Students' response was important, some only joining online classes, but not getting involved, proving this form of education only worked for the motivated students who already had a good level of knowledge. Many teachers complained about the general lack of involvement and response of their students. Regarding the consequences of the pandemic period on education, the following topics were mentioned: the advanced process of digitisation and students becoming more responsible, as positive aspects, but also a negative impact, the traumatic impact of the pandemic. However, more research needs to be done, the case-study presented here being a small scale one and focussed only on a few aspects, therefore the results not being generalisable.

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## **EDUCATIONAL POLICIES AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC PERIOD IN GREECE**

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## **Abstract**

This chapter provides a brief description of the timeline of education during the pandemic in the Greek educational system, with references to circulars and instructions provided to the educational community, the forms used to support distance education (synchronous, asynchronous, and through educational TV programmes), the benefits, but also the risks that arose from the engagement of students and teachers with distance education, as well as the role that the director was asked to guide the school unit throughout this demanding undertaking. In addition, the findings from the interviews of 18 Greek humanities/social studies teachers of secondary education are listed regarding the role of teachers themselves, students, and parents, the advantages and disadvantages of distance education, the challenges for socially vulnerable students, as well as for the experiences they gain after managing this crisis in their educational everyday life.

## **Introduction**

A new virus emerged in 2019, known to the public as Covid-19, resulting in a global pandemic a few months later. The virus had 118,000 cases in 114 different countries, taking the life of 4,291 people worldwide. A global information campaign emerged to protect public health, introducing measures like frequent hand washing, keeping distance between people, avoiding touching the eyes and nose, and medical intervention whenever there are symptoms (World Health Organization, Regional Office of Europe, 2020).

However, apart from the public health sector, the rapid spread of Covid-19 worldwide has forced all countries to take decisive action in various areas that will help alleviate this pandemic. One of the main measures taken is the suspension of educational institutions. According to data from Unesco (2020), the operation of educational institutions was suspended due to the Covid-19 pandemic for the first time on 10/04/2020. According to the global picture, it affected about 190 countries worldwide and numerically concerned 1,578,657,884 students. Specifically in Greece, it has affected a total of 2,204,532 students, of which 152,462 attend

kindergarten, 649,246 in primary school, 667,797 in secondary education, and 735,027 in higher education.

### **Operation of educational institutions. The chronicle of the pandemic for the educational community**

The Greek Ministry of Education had to carry out a very demanding project in a very short period and take a series of emergency initiatives, which were the guidelines for the entire educational community during the pandemic. To support this new educational reality, the ministry had to issue several circulars and Joint Ministerial Decisions (JMD).

The Government, in the context of protection of public health against coronavirus Covid-19 and following a recommendation of the National Committee for Public Health Protection, announced a series of measures and regulations to protect the students and the schools' staff from the pandemic (JMD D1a/GP.oik.20021/2020; JMD

D1a/GP.oik.24343/2020). Initially, in April 2020, the operation of all public and private schools of all levels, tuition centres, and any kind of educational structure was interrupted, with the potentiality of covering new material and not only repetitions for which they were informed subsequently ([covid19.gov.gr](https://www.covid19.gov.gr), 2020b).

After a reassessment of the epidemiological situation, instructions were sent to the school units in May for their gradual reopening, which was accompanied by information notes to the staff, the parents, and the students. The information material contained information on topics such as: a) Covid-19 and the symptoms of the disease, b) modes of transmission, c) self-protection and third-party protection measures, and d) measures that need to be taken in case of occurrence of the disease at school. Moreover, a series of instructions proposed by experts for the safety of students and teachers (distance education, masks, sanitation, ventilation, etc. ([covid19.gov.gr](https://www.covid19.gov.gr), 2020c). Tutoring centres and language centres followed the gradual reopening of the respective educational level (JMD 63314/GD4/2020). Additionally, excursions, visits, events, student and teacher exchange programmes, and the operation of libraries were prohibited (JMD D1a/GP.oik.28237/2020). The safe transport of students was restricted to half of the fullness of school buses, ventilation and disinfection was mandatory, while for the transport of students by taxi it was required the use of mask (JMD 27731/2020). Recommendations were provided for

the primary education schools, and the special education and training schools, such as feeding by delivering packaged meals, observing high hygiene standards, using the dining area (keeping distances, and in small groups of students), taking care of the thorough cleaning and disinfection of the feeding areas. To limit student interaction, systematic segregation was suggested to avoid overcrowding. The programme schedule became adjustable, as well as breaks and on-call hours, while there was no gathering of students in the courtyard in the morning. In addition, to avoid overcrowding in the school units, the registration of the country's toddlers was implemented electronically through a Digital Portal of the Public Administration ([gov.gr](http://gov.gr)) (JMD 53128/D1, 2020). Moreover, in case a student had a statement of their parents that they or the child belong to an increased risk group, its absences were forfeited (JMD F.7/FM/63728/GD4/2020, JMD DIDAD/F.64/346/9011/2020). The academic year closed with an announcement that the beginning of the new school year will take place earlier, and more specifically on September 7, 2020, so teachers can have the opportunity to repeat and fill any gaps that arose from the suspension of educational units due to the coronavirus ([covid19.gov.gr](http://covid19.gov.gr), 2020d).

After the increase of the epidemiological burden in the country, it was decided to start distance learning again in November (JMD 151978/GD4/2020; JMD D1a/GP.oik.80189/2020; JMD D1a/GP.oik.1293/2021; JMD D1a/GP.oik.3060/2021), with reduced teaching duration, until January 2021. ([covid19.gov.gr](http://covid19.gov.gr), 2020e). The beginning of in-person education for Primary Education students at first was decided, while the Secondary units started the following month, but only in areas where the epidemiological burden allowed it. For the lively operation of the schools, instructions were provided for the option of different arrival and departure times of students, to avoid overcrowding (JMD D1a/GP.oik.969/2021). Additional instructions regarding the safe operation of High Schools (different breaks, particular measures for adapted operation of canteens, computer labs, use of musical instruments, etc.) were given later that year ([covid19.gov.gr](http://covid19.gov.gr), 2021). Finally, in May 2021, the return of the first and second-grade students to the classrooms was defined with a statement of self-diagnostic test with the parallel application of the existing measures (JMD D1a/GP.oik.29114/2020).

In the next school year, the profile of the pandemic changed since both the mass vaccinations of the population and the extensive self-diagnostic tests of students in the country's schools have played a catalytic role. This resulted in the issuance of circulars at the start of the new

school year, in September 2021, where the school units of the country were required to provide synchronous distance education in the following cases (JMD D1a/GP.oik. 55254/0909-2021):

- a) For the students at school units that are temporarily suspended or prohibited from operating, as a measure to deal with the COVID-19 coronavirus, and for as long as they remain in this status;
- b) For the students at school units that operate normally, and they are not under a temporary suspension or prohibition of operation, but cannot attend the educational process in person, namely:
  - i) For students under the age of twelve (12) who suffer from serious underlying diseases.
  - ii) For students over twelve (12) years of age, who suffer from underlying diseases, after
  - iii) To students who live with persons suffering from an underlying disease that leads to severe immunosuppression. The responsibility to examine the above requests was handed to a special committee.

### **Utilization of digital means**

The difficult health situation of the country made the reopening of educational structures more and more distant, and for this reason, it was immediately considered appropriate to identify ways to keep children from being removed from everyday school life. At that time, distance education was proposed, which seemed to be the only solution for the over-indulgence of the specific scope. In particular, the Greek Ministry of Education, by creating a campaign with the slogan "Coronavirus: Staying at home - Learning at home" informed all participants in the educational community and brought them into contact with distance education, which worked in a variety of ways. In particular, its asynchronous form is exploited through the digital platform "e-me" and the digital class "e-class". In addition, it operates in a synchronous format with the "Open Cisco Webex Meetings" distance learning application, while finally, for primary school students, standard taped lessons from the country's teachers were shown on state television. Moreover, new instructions were provided to teachers through a circular for the existence of useful tools and instructions related to asynchronous distance education (MD 154837/D3/12-11-2020) for their utilization in their daily teaching, even when is carried out in person.

### *Synchronous distance education*

From May 2020 (JMD 57233/Y1/2020) the units that were still temporarily banned for in-person, could provide synchronous remote education. The units that operated, but some students stayed at home for health reasons had the possibility of simultaneous transmission of their lesson. The Directors of the educational structures of Primary and Secondary Education had to implement synchronous distance education in consultation with the Teachers' Association, applying a Time Schedule following the following basic instructions (MD 155689/GD4/14-112020):

- a) The start of classes was set at 08:00 for High Schools, at 08:30 for Secondary Schools, and at 14:10 for Kindergartens and Elementary Schools.
- b) The duration of the teaching period was set for Primary Education at 30 minutes. The daily timetable includes Kindergartens and Primary Schools at least three (3) and five (5) teaching hours respectively.
- c) The duration of the teaching period was set for Secondary Education at 40 minutes. The daily timetable in high schools includes at least six (6) or seven (7) teaching hours, depending on the general timetable.

Synchronous distance education was carried out in Greece through the Webex platform. The specific distance learning platform was used because it is considered suitable for all participants in the educational process, teachers, and students, as it is easily accessible and flexible, actively involving students in the learning process (Mavromati, 2021).

#### *Asynchronous education*

For asynchronous education, the Ministry of Education and Religion provided teachers with two digital platforms to support their work remotely. These are the e-class and e-me platforms. According to the information provided by the e-class page itself (e-class), it is a synchronous educational platform for students and teachers, which is a flexible, safe, and easy-to-use digital environment for learning, communication, and collaboration (<https://eclass.sch.gr/>). Regarding e-me (<https://e-me.edu.gr>), it is a modern, collaborative, social, and scalable digital platform for students and teachers, designed to support formal, non-formal, and informal learning activities. It provides the school community with a secure digital workplace and collaboration space and is available from the Ministry of Education as an asynchronous education platform for Greek schools. In addition, e-me is a personal learning environment and

supports the creation of private and public collaboration spaces (cells), communication and social networking of students and teachers, organization, storage, and sharing of files in a cloud environment, easy creation of digital learning materials, assignment, and tracking of assignments, display of work through collaborative and individual blogs, utilization of open educational resources from the “Photodentro” repository and others, while providing digital tools to support of teaching and learning.

It is worth saying that both the traffic and the use of the above platforms were growing rapidly every day, with e-class listing 426,352 online courses, 755,625 students, and 117,126 teachers from Greek schools and the e-me platform 367,266 students, 72,459 teachers and 102,360 cells (Bakirtzi, 2021).

### *Educational TV programmes*

The last weapon in the quiver of distance education was Educational TV programmes. Specifically, the Ministry of Education, in collaboration with the Greek Institute of Educational Policy and the State Television, decided to utilize one of the most dynamic means of mass communication, Educational Television, with the production and presentation of television courses shown through the public television ERT2, as a synchronous, audio-visual educational proposal for elementary school students to strengthen their contact with the learning environment and the educational process (Papadimitriou, 2020). The whole project started in March 2020, in everyday programmes at 10 am from the ERT2 channel. This tool came to compensate for students' lack of digital equipment, providing education to students who, due to economic/social status, were unable to own the appropriate hardware. The response of the public was particularly high, since according to the official data of Nielsen (report 4/5/2020), the viewing percentage reached 51.2% among children aged 4-14, while the percentages of parents, especially fathers, were also impressive. It is indicative that among men aged 25-44, the average viewership reached 28.7%, and among women 15.5%. 150.000 TV viewers watched the lessons every day, while the average percentage of TV viewing among 4-14-year-olds exceeded 35% (Papadimitriou, 2020).

### **Risks of distance education**

The main bet of the Greek Ministry of Education, regarding the instructions and circulars issued throughout the pandemic, was to continue the educational process of children and cover their

need for contact with their colleagues. In such an extreme condition as the Covid-19 disease, the most suitable solution was the use of distance education through electronic communication sources that provide flexibility, both in terms of time and place for all participants in the educational process (educators and students) (Strigas & Tsibiris, 2019). Nevertheless, as in any imperative decision-making, there were also concerns regarding the risks that arose for all participants in it.

#### *Inadequate preparation of teachers and students*

The unusual solution of distance education used by most countries brought both teachers and students face-to-face with a new reality, without any period of adaptation or preparation. The participants in the educational process were asked to integrate into their daily school reality new, but mostly unknown practices through distance learning platforms, while in their educational route, they were never asked to do anything different than in-person education, in the educational environment of the physical classroom, but also many times (mainly for the older teachers) without making even the slightest use of the new technologies. All the above had the result that the whole project was treated with carelessness, given that the majority of teachers were not able to meet the new requirements. This resulted in the learning path of the students being adjusted by the personal motivations of each teacher to be informed in time (most often through a circle of personal acquaintances) to be able to respond to their new tasks, but at their disposal to devote personal time to carry out the appropriate planning of a lesson and educational materials required to support distance teaching (Radovan, 2019).

#### *Voucher delay*

The delayed issuance of the 200-euro voucher for the purchase of technological equipment by the participants in the educational process, resulted in unequal access to education for students from low socio-economic strata, since they did not have the appropriate tools, materials, and resources. This resulted in circumventing the existence of distance education, which relied on promoting equality of access, and instead leading to the widening of inequalities and causing problems due to the digital divide (Dhawan, 2020; Klein & Morton, 2020). This delay also had a direct impact on the work of teachers who did not have equipment and had to visit their school unit and put their health at risk, to be able to serve their duty.

#### *Insufficient parental preparation*

In addition to the teachers and the students, the parents of the children - especially those in Primary Education - were asked to take on a key role in the educational process, assisting their children in the learning process. This specific condition was particularly demanding for the whole family since the equipment was required for both the students in the family and for the parents who worked remotely, a separate workspace for each family member, but above all the digital literacy of the parents so that they could support the whole project and solve connection problems that arose during the courses. All the above dimensions raised concerns about ultimately providing equal access to learning for all children regardless of their socioeconomic background.

#### *Lack of socialization of students and teachers*

The educational process did not only include the acquisition of knowledge by the students but was inextricably linked to the socialization of the participants. Based on empirical findings (Burdina et al., 2019; Moallem, 2015), during covid-19 a reduced interaction between students was observed with a direct result in identifying difficulties in their socialization. The above findings sounded the alarm that in possible new crises where the utilization of distance education would appear to be the only way, a revision of the existing system is required to primarily offer more opportunities for interaction, but also secondarily to train the participants in the utilization of more collaborative forms of activities.

#### **Benefits of distance education**

The synchronous distance education project managed to leave a positive imprint on the educational community as it was an opportunity for both teachers and students to enrich their knowledge with the use of digital tools and educational platforms. After all, distance education, according to the literature, offers many advantages to the instructor and the trainee since it is student-centred and provides flexibility, both in terms of time and in terms of its location, while it can adapt to the appropriate actions to the educational needs of the students at any given time (Dhawan, 2020).

The continuous contact of the teachers with a multitude of digital tools for the creation of educational material strengthened, as a direct result, their familiarity with them and the acquisition of knowledge by the students through digital environments. All this familiarity brought the increased integration of new technologies in the educational process even today,



through the use of the opportunities they provide to make the educational process friendlier for children.

The ministry has tried to reinforce the new reality of teachers by making decisions that remove inequalities in digital access issues. An important decision was announced in April 2020, where the request of the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Digital Governance to telephone companies was accepted, and free access was provided to all students for online courses (covid19.gov.gr, 2020a). Additionally, in December 2020, a decision was issued on "Start of action". It was a free and rapid teacher training in the field of distance education, to cultivate knowledge and digital skills in pedagogical and didactic approaches, with the support of synchronous digital media.

It is worth saying that the immediate need to find a solution to the issue of removing children from the natural environment of the classroom resulted in teachers finding themselves meteoric in front of a new educational reality. Given the circumstances, the teachers were asked to get together immediately in groups to succeed in supporting each other, so that those who understand the technology may act as a lever of support for the digitally illiterate. The whole project resulted in the strengthening of both the individual and collective responsibility of the teachers, characteristics that constitute a necessary guarantee for the development of citizenship.

### **Role of school-leaders**

The educational leader in the modern school is asked to embody a complex role, especially if we consider that they should lead a school unit, which is an open system with several subsystems, such as people, buildings, administration, teaching, etc, which are in constant interaction and interdependence with each other, but many times the goals of one may conflict with the goals of the other (Hatzipanagiotou, 2008; Saitis, 2007). In addition, the director of each school unit acts as a coordinator and leads the crisis management team (Barclay, 2004), having the greatest responsibility, taking decisions and measures for the participants in the educational process, through coordinated actions with the staff (Kerr, 2016). They must gather the necessary information for the management of the crisis, report to the other members, control the course of progress, and make decisions for the smooth outcome of the actions, while at the end they undertake the demanding task of evaluating all the actions (Thompson, 2002).

Such an important crisis was faced by school directors during the Covid-19 period, where their responsibilities increased rapidly due to the huge amount of instructions and circulars that they had to manage every day, since they, first of all, had to understand and then be able to communicate them to all participants in the educational process, teachers, students, and parents, with the ultimate goal of the smooth operation of their school unit. It was a particularly demanding undertaking if one considers, on the one hand, how unfamiliar this all seemed and, on the other hand, the difficulty of coordinating so many people but also standing with professionalism and composure to all those who resisted coming to terms with the new reality.

Thus, school principals were invited through instructions for distance education (Y.II.E.II.Θ, 2020) to organize the educational potential of their school unit to maintain contact with their families and students, and to proceed together in the planning and support of distance education, making use of the available equipment at the current time for the implementation of synchronous and asynchronous communication.

One of the most basic measures that should have been carried out by the directors of the school units was to safeguard the non-dispersal of the virus among students and teachers, by the faithful application of hygiene measures as well as the use of protective masks. Specifically, according to the Ministry, there was an explicit order not to admit those who do not wear a protective mask at school. The principals were therefore asked to face an ethical dilemma since some students forgot to bring a mask, therefore in many cases, the principals procured disposable masks, shouldering the financial costs themselves to protect their students from missing their lessons (Geropoulos & Tsioumis, 2021).

Another key role of an educational leader is to provide the right direction for the members of their educational community and at the same time to be able to influence and act as an activation lever for their subordinates. The condition of the pandemic was particularly demanding for everyone, and many people became anxious about how to manage the new reality. The director of the school unit had to empower and motivate their teachers through a climate of unity and cooperation, to correspond to the new challenges. They were called to be close to them, provide proper guidance, create collaborative groups that would act as a motivational lever for the digitally illiterate, and keep them constantly informed about new developments clearly,

avoiding tensions and spreading panic. The state, to promote the autonomy of school units, designated the directors as responsible for the coordination of distance education, such as informing all participants, providing information on registration on the education platforms, and ensuring the parents regarding the compliance with the security of the personal data of their children.

Apart from the teachers, the principal's role had to be empowering both the students and the parents of their school unit. In particular, they were required to notify by electronic communication all the relevant instructions they received, to be available to solve questions and address issues that arose both during the period when the schools were closed and later when they reopened under strict measures. As for the students, the principals were tasked with informing them in various ways, such as videos and instructions, but also through informational posters about the correct use of masks.

All of the above highlights the important role that the director of the school unit was called upon to perform every day regarding the communication between the school and the family. Local findings (Kessopoulou & Tsibidaki, 2021) confirm the regulatory role played by the principal during the pandemic as a connection link between home and school, since during the pandemic more frequent, more intense, and parallel communication with parents and students, as well as teachers, was deemed necessary. After all, as it is reasonably stated in the literature, the actions of principals determine the effectiveness and efficiency of students (Brauckmann & Pashiardis, 2020), demonstrating the particularly demanding role of a principal.

### **Case-study of secondary education teachers in Thessaloniki, Greece, about educational policy and social responsibility during the Covid-19 pandemic**

To investigate the Covid-19 phenomenon in the educational community, it was deemed necessary to utilize the focus groups method. The research was carried out during the months of April and May 2022 and 18 humanities/social studies teachers of secondary education who work in urban and rural areas of Thessaloniki took part. The teachers during their interviews were asked to answer questions regarding educational policy and social responsibility during the Covid-19 pandemic.

## **Roles of the teachers during online/distance education during the Covid-19 pandemic period**

The interview started with the opinions of the sample regarding the roles of the teachers during online/distance education during the Covid-19 pandemic period, and this elicited various responses with regard to working with new technologies; on the need to develop new educational skills; and challenges in fostering on-line interaction; and in supporting students psychologically.

Some teachers felt ‘helpful’, and although they tried to have an active role, using material from various websites, chat facilities and emoji’s to encourage interaction the children's participation was reduced. Others felt their role was upgraded. They had guest speakers, showed various videos and materials other than the recommended ones, and there was increased interactivity with students turning on their cameras. It was also pointed out that the teachers had to manage things they had not come into contact with previously that to deal with the digital school, they had to adopt new ways of teaching, and integrating students, and in doing so had to carefully consider how best to psychologically support the children.

*“At first, I felt like an IT educator. It took me a while to function as a philologist. But still all the times with technical problems. But I finally made it. But I invested a lot in the pedagogical side of the profession.” (T4 GR)*

*“Since the beginning of the pandemic, we have been tasked with implementing distance education methods very quickly without adequate guidance, training, or resources being provided to us. Our most basic duty in online lessons during the pandemic period was to prevent learning losses as much as possible by increasing the learning motivation of students. Our role became even more complex, even more demanding, even more stressful. The shift to online education has meant rethinking lesson plans to fit a very different format. We created digital teaching content, and we leveraged our digital skills for communication and collaboration with students and their parents. We were, also, called upon to manage elements such as: the psychological burden on students from the anxiety caused by the spread of the disease itself, the psychological pressure that comes from the imposition of social isolation and removal, the anxiety of students about the outcome of the exams and especially the exams for the University, the inability of many*

*students to cope with the expectations of the school especially if they do not have the necessary means, their inability to meet the demands of new forms of education, the expectations of parents and guardians for the provision of teaching of the same quality as before pandemic period, their anxiety to become effective in their obligations, their working future after the pandemic, etc”.* (T2 GR)

Others said that children who had issues were given the opportunity to express themselves. According to another teacher, at the top of the list was keeping the class and the actual teaching came second. Another teacher described the difficult situation that teachers were experiencing:

*“I felt like an actor. I was teaching my lesson, but the children did not participate. Especially in the early hours. The cameras were also off...everyone was lying down...a lesson with pyjamas, cookies and coffee is not possible. Along the way, of course, I got active. Videos, questions, games, museum visits ... I kept them alive. I upgraded”.*  
(T6GR)

### **Advantages and disadvantages of learning online/distance education**

The discussion continued with the investigation of teachers' opinions regarding the advantages and disadvantages of learning online/distance education. From the findings it emerged that everyone was stressed and there were interaction problems. Students started well and then levels of interaction fell off. Many students were not physically present with suggestion that isolation brought a lack of interest. The material was advanced but understanding and interest needed to be generated by the teachers. Nevertheless, access to the digital school and the better management of the exercises were counted as positives,

*“By extending the lesson plan beyond traditional textbooks to include online resources, we created learning environments that enhanced both the student experience and learning outcomes. That’s an advantage”.* (T2GR)

On the other hand, the short adaptation time, lack of access to devices and the reduction of communication due to the lack of live teaching were counted as disadvantages.

*“...students away from school lost the benefit of the most important pillar of socialization. The socially weaker students faced even greater barriers to access to knowledge. Not every student has access to a tablet, computer, and internet”,*

*“...the impossibility of fully identifying the details of all those who enter the platform in several cases created conditions of problematic communication, verbal attacks, a completely anti-educational climate and environment...”. (T4GR)*

In contrast, the opportunity for communication during ‘lock down’ was also noted as having potential benefit,

*“It helped the students to deal with the negative feelings they felt due to social distancing and isolation during the quarantine, as it was perhaps the only opportunity to talk to their friends”. (T10GR)*

Other positive aspects of digital learning were also noted, including that the children saw something different,

*“they understood that the tablet is not only for Tik-Tok, but you can also do a lesson, search things. A different type of introduction to the internet, which could not have been done without distance learning. The use of some functions, such as breakout rooms, gave students also the opportunity to work in groups and more autonomously in relation to the classroom.” (T2GR)*

A major problem was the lack of communication, active participation, keeping students interested and managing their fatigue:

*“...things are different, and it loses in quality in relation to living, mainly in the passion of the moment, which is very important in the educational process. The fact also that they don't completely see you, so you must stand up and make movements, where at many times the image gets stuck... all this freezes the process as well”. (TG2GR)*

There was a sense of depression:

*“I see it as devastating for children and teachers. I think there is no comparison. At school you can do anything. Make groups, games, go out in the yard, give materials to hold, make it more experiential. In general, the digital classroom was colder; it can only be achieved with physical presence. So, in many cases the humour and jokes we might have in class were missing, and it was difficult for me not to be able to look the student in the eye and identify any difficulties they might have”.* (T7GR)

### **Role of parents**

At the next question, the respondents were asked to give their perspective regarding the role that parents had in this whole process. Some educators said that the parents did not participate other than to offer the children the means of electronic access, or that they participated in a controlling manner and their comments were heard. The children did not want the parents present and they found themselves at an impasse.

*“Parents tried to be supportive and effective in their obligations. They made efforts to equip their children with suitable digital equipment so that they could participate in online classes. It was more difficult for families that did not have an internet connection, or a computer with the corresponding equipment (camera, headphones, speakers, etc.)”.* (TG5GR)

The parents, when they were at home, attended the lesson in the 1st High School and only partially in the 2nd. In the other classes the role was non-existent, *“...they were critical at the first opportunity...as always”.* (T5GR)

### **Challenges for vulnerable groups of children**

Very interesting findings also emerged from the question about the challenges for the vulnerable groups of children. Specifically, the teachers argued that social inequalities grow during the pandemic. Three teachers mentioned problems with children with distraction and pointed out that the poorest participated from a mobile phone and could not take advantage of the tools. It was also noted that this condition helped children with mobility problems. Responses highlighted the problems of vulnerable social groups, while favouring those facing health issues. Another teacher pointed out that vulnerable groups had difficulty with the lack of internet which was a key issue. Specifically, argued that:

*“The most vulnerable students might not have access to digital learning resources. There were families that didn't not have an internet connection, nor did they own computer with the corresponding equipment (camera, headphones, speakers, etc.)”.* (T9GR)

Although it was argued that the digital classroom was ‘colder’, social distance and a degree of anonymity, enabled some students to participate more freely:

*“The children with communication problems were more withdrawn to themselves, but those who did not participate in the lesson I feel were more activated. He was hiding behind the closed camera, and they were speaking their mind”.* (T4GR)

Of particular interest is a teacher's view of the shyest students, where she argues that,

*“One benefit is that kids who were shy- I have a little girl who is closed and doesn't talk much and needs encouragement. In distance education, she was a little freer. She spoke more, louder... And other colleagues said that many shy children presented a different self. Also, kids who might have been more hesitant in class, you could see that with the New Technologies they wanted to participate in all of it, they liked it, they didn't think they would say something wrong and be evaluated... Now the results for special education are bigger as it sounds negative”.* (T6GR)

### **Institutional role of the Ministry of Education**

Throughout the pandemic, many different forces had to be mobilized at the same time to deal with the emerging challenges in the most effective way. Of particular interest are the findings regarding how teachers perceive the institutional role of the Ministry of Education during the pandemic crisis. Although it was recognised that the Ministry was acting under great pressure in an unprecedented situation, it was felt that more could have been done, ranging from support at a broad policy level, for example in outlining principles of distant education, to more practical help and pedagogical guidance. Teachers often had to resource their own learning, they helped each other, used social media, and shared advice. Facebook groups were created to exchange advice.



*“The Ministry of Education provided platforms for both synchronous tele-teaching and asynchronous learning” (T2 GR) and “At the end only the Ministry helped somewhat. In the beginning the situation was chaotic as it was emphasized. The teachers relied on what they could do with each other. But there were also problems with the internet, which was stuck and dropped”. (T5GR)*

Others noted that there were no computers, some teachers did not have internet and computers, as did the students:

*“When I needed to participate in teleconferences, I always connected from two devices, from the computer and the mobile phone. I could hear sound or talk from the mobile phone and see an image from the computer. Which forced me, but I do distance learning from the school computer, but not all computers were suitable. Where was the Ministry? He took it for granted that we all had full equipment at home. But even if we had...our children used it!”*, (T3GR)

*“In fact, a characteristic of the delay of the authorities was the start of these training programmes after the end of the suspension of the schools and the programme Digital Care” for the provision of equipment to students one year after the start of distance education. Deficiencies in this area not only affect the quality and effectiveness of the educational work provided but have had a significant impact on the mitigation of educational inequalities brought about by the exclusion of some social groups from distance education (this also concerns the question of vulnerable groups)”. (T6GR)*

However, one respondent suggested that,

*“the reaction of the Ministry was immediate, but the teachers did not respond... Training has been given and with the personal effort of the teachers, things went well! Vouchers were also given for computers...” (T4GR)*

### **Responsibilities of students during the pandemic**

The Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the need for immediate activation of all people to act. In the educational community, students were now asked to take a very active role in their

learning process. It is interesting, however, how the teachers perceived the responsibilities of students during the pandemic. Specifically, it emerged that the teachers stated that the students did not have obligations or did not fulfil them. They had responsibilities, but they probably didn't manage them. But some cooperated. The responsibility of the students was to attend the lessons, so that they would not be cut off. It was also noted that it took maturity to engage students in a relaxed environment, they also handed in digital assignments.

Other respondents pointed out that the students considered it a basic obligation to enter the lesson, but they did not actually participate and two mentioned that they entered while in their beds. In some cases, the majority of the children did not hand in assignments, but this did not mean more activation in the lesson. Another teacher noted that the children saw distance learning as a waste of time, and this was evident to her children as well. The students gradually lost interest and became more tired in relation to the in-site lesson,

*“I had a child who didn't want to go in because he got tired, he wasn't interested, he got tired of "are you listening, aren't you listening? It takes a long time before it's your turn to speak again and participate in the lesson, so you lose interest. In general, I would say that in the first phase, in the fall, they were much happier that the lesson was done on the computer. But gradually this interest waned”.* (T9GR)

They had seen the possibilities they offered, and it was no longer easy to get their interest, it was nothing new,

*“In general, they did not understand I would say their responsibilities at a distance. They saw it as a necessary evil, a transitional period”.*

*“To me they had more responsibilities than at school because they had more challenges to not pay attention in class, but the kids didn't understand that. They equated their responsibilities with entering the platform...sleeping, eating...besides, they gradually lost interest in the course and did not want to participate in the teleconferences or visit the asynchronous platform, even if I prepared for them interesting material as I want to believe digital material”.* (T3GR)

### **What remained from the online/distance education during the pandemic period**

Finally, the discussion concluded with what teachers believe should remain from the online/distance education during the pandemic period. The main concern was the curriculum, the need for application, that no lesson was missed, but it was important to ensure participation. Parallel distance education was considered important as a supportive means. It was pointed out, of course, that distance education does not replace live education, but nevertheless it can help in more direct and efficient education.

Among the main takeaways from the pandemic were the preparedness to manage such situations, that teachers learned to work remotely to a significant extent. One teacher said that they learned that they should work more cooperatively:

*“That teachers, at any price and personal cost, rose to the occasion and fulfilled their duty in terms of an "instinctive professionalism". While they did not provide us with the means, we effectively fulfilled our social mission and debt towards the society”.* (T4GR)

Another teacher described in a characteristic way the improvement of teachers' relationship with distance education and with the social media used by students, pointing out that the new conditions helped them to modernize:

*“We, teachers were shaken and modernized and came a little closer to students because the majority of teachers today are old and did not know how to operate a computer and these platforms. So, it's positive that we trained, that we tried and got closer to our students because we can't be in an era where students are all day with a Facebook”.* (T2GR)

Another teacher emphasized that the new experience showed that the normal class was not replaced:

*“Class and class again. But definitely what I will keep is time management. And in live you prepare, but online you need more and what you show in 45 minutes needs to be more targeted, while in live you can say more”* (T4GR),

*“You made a choice of goals... Online time flows completely differently and if you don't find something interesting to grab the kids' interest, you won't succeed in distance education”.* (T1GR)

## **Conclusion**

Dealing with a health crisis is not something unprecedented for the global community and a review of past years can confirm this. The diversification of the Covid-19 pandemic is due to a demanding bet that governments have been asked to serve to manage the phenomenon of social distancing of people, while at the same time exploiting the possibilities provided by new technologies. This involved the direct coordination of many people from different groups (educational officials, teachers, students, and parents) to operate in new and uncharted waters. Distance education was implemented by most countries as the most convenient solution, which in our country took various forms (synchronous, asynchronous, radio, and educational TV programmes). Nevertheless, the proposed solution could be nothing more than a temporary emergency act, since it came in response to the total movement bans that prevailed in the country at the current period, but also to meet the need for the social distancing of people to protect themselves from the transmission of the disease. The fact that this option was an emergency solution, which tried to respond to existing problems that forced educational communities to adopt immediate, temporary different strategic priorities in the educational process (Bozkurt & Sharma 2020), was also evident from the carelessness with which it was implemented at the beginning since both teachers and students were asked to manage digital tools that they did not even know.

It is worth mentioning that the educational community of the country which is always active in what is happening, managed to shoulder the burden of the new reality and by making superhuman efforts and spending valuable personal time and effort, managed to respond immediately to the new requirements. The pressure was increased, and the material means were meagre. The same was true for institutional support, which was little and delayed. Teachers have had to face the task of their training largely alone. The struggle of the participants in the educational process to respond to their new tasks had the effect of digitally empowering the educational community since it managed to enrich the professional skills of the teachers who in a very short period managed to educate themselves on the new data and apply new educational methods. In addition, through distance education, the students were also

empowered and managed to increase their autonomy and their responsibility regarding the obligations arising from their new school reality.

In this context, the contribution of the director of the school unit was decisive since they were called to fulfil multiple roles. On the one hand, having the role of team leader, responsible for empowering all participants of the educational community to assume roles, leaving behind personal beliefs, and on the other hand having the role of controller from the state, strictly recording absences, informing about cases, and checking medical certificates. This often resulted in the creation of conflicts which hindered the smooth outcome of the necessary procedures.

Summarizing, we would say that the centralized system of Greece does not leave much space for relative autonomy, resulting in limitations in the role of the manager to the typical bureaucratic handling of tasks based on the relevant institutional framework (Brinia, 2014). If in this we include the suffocating contexts of dealing with a health crisis that does not allow mistakes that can even cost human lives, it is immediately apparent how difficult the task was for the school directors to carry out.

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# **EDUCATIONAL POLICIES AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC PERIOD IN PRE-WAR UKRAINE**

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## **Abstract**

The chapter deals with the analysis of the educational policy implemented due to the Covid-19 pandemic in the period between 12 March 2020, and 24 February 2022, in Ukraine. The educational policy is analyzed on the following levels: laws of Ukraine, decrees of Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, decrees of the Chief state sanitary doctor of Ukraine, Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine, departments of education in territorial and local communities. The challenges and transformations of distance learning in conditions of Covid-19 are described. The analysis of focus groups with school teachers is presented with particular attention to social responsibility, the advantages and disadvantages of distance learning.



## **General characteristics of the Covid-19 pandemic counteraction in the system of education in pre-war Ukraine**

Educators from all over the world encountered a global challenge caused by the pandemic Covid-19. Practical counteractions to the pandemic were formed situationally in most countries. The analysis of educational policies implemented due to Covid-19 pandemic in Ukraine presented in this article covers the period between 12<sup>th</sup> March 2020, when quarantine was officially proclaimed in Ukraine and 24<sup>th</sup> February 2022, when the war in Ukraine started.

One of the counteractions to Covid-19 pandemic in Ukraine, as in many other countries, was the temporary closure of educational establishments. The academic year 2019 – 2020 was finished in distant format. It is worth taking into account that at that time there was the following distribution of pupils and students in educational establishments: 1,230,398 pupils in pre-school educational establishments, 4,138,466 pupils in general secondary educational establishments, 245,775 pupils in professional technical educational establishments, 1,439,706 students in higher educational establishments (Statistical Yearbook of Ukraine for 2020, available at [https://ukrstat.gov.ua/druk/publicat/kat\\_u/2021/zb/11/Yearbook\\_2020\\_e.pdf](https://ukrstat.gov.ua/druk/publicat/kat_u/2021/zb/11/Yearbook_2020_e.pdf)).

According to the State service of statistics of Ukraine in 2019 – 2020 there were 14,763 pre-school educational establishments, 15,194 general secondary educational establishments, 723 professional technical educational establishments, 619 higher educational establishments. The amount of pedagogical and scientific-pedagogical workers in educational establishments was the following: 137,450 pedagogical workers in pre-school educational establishments, 439921 pedagogical workers in general secondary educational establishments, 32841 pedagogical workers in professional technical educational establishments, 127493 pedagogical and scientific-pedagogical workers in higher educational establishments (Statistical Yearbook of Ukraine (2020), [https://ukrstat.gov.ua/druk/publicat/kat\\_u/2021/zb/11/Yearbook\\_2020\\_e.pdf](https://ukrstat.gov.ua/druk/publicat/kat_u/2021/zb/11/Yearbook_2020_e.pdf)).

Gradually, the situation with counter-epidemic actions in Ukraine was clarified due to the existing and newly developed normative-legal basis, which determined characteristics of the educational sphere, functioning and organizational actions implementation in conditions of quarantine on several levels: laws of Ukraine, decrees of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine,

decrees of the Chief state sanitary doctor of Ukraine, Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine, administration (departments of education) of territorial and local communities.

### **First level – laws of Ukraine**

Article 29, Law of Ukraine “About protection of population from infectious diseases” with changes included during 2003 – 2020 determines order of quarantine establishing (See <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/1645-14#Text>).

Article 20, Law of Ukraine “About provision of sanitary and epidemic wellbeing of population” with changes included during 1995 – 2021 determines conditions of upbringing and teaching according to sanitary norms as well as actions aimed at health preservation and strengthening of participants of education process (<https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/4004-12#Text>).

### **Second level – decrees of Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine (CMU)**

Decree of CMU № 211 from 11<sup>th</sup> March 2020 “About the prevention of coronavirus Covid-19 spreading over the territory of Ukraine” prohibited visiting educational establishments on the whole territory of Ukraine during quarantine (see <https://www.kmu.gov.ua/npas/pro-zapobigannya-poshim110320rennyu-na-teritoriyiukrayini-koronavirusu-covid-19>).

Items 3.4 and 4 of Decree of CMU № 392 from 20<sup>th</sup> May 2020 “About establishing quarantine aimed at prevention of acute respiratory disease Covid-19 caused by coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 spreading over the territory of Ukraine and stages of counter-epidemic actions weakening” which implements the weakening of counter-epidemic actions on the territory of regions with favourable epidemic situation, e.g. visiting lessons with less than 10 persons in educational establishments.

Item 17 of Decree of CMU № 641 from 22<sup>nd</sup> July 2020 “About establishing of quarantine and implementation of strong counter-epidemic actions on the territory with significant spreading of acute respiratory disease Covid-19 caused by SARS-CoV-2”.

Item 2.16 – 2.18 of Decree of CMU № 1236 from 09<sup>th</sup> December 2020 “About establishing of quarantine and implementation of restricting counter-epidemic actions aimed at prevention of spreading of acute respiratory disease Covid-19 caused by SARS-CoV-2 on the territory of Ukraine”.

Item 14 – 15 of Decree of CMU № 104 from 17<sup>th</sup> “About inclusion of changes to some acts of Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine”.

### **Third level – decrees of Chief state sanitary doctor of Ukraine**

Decree № 24 of Chief state sanitary doctor of Ukraine from 21<sup>st</sup> May 2020 “About approval of temporary recommendations concerning organization of counter-epidemic actions during outer independent evaluation, singular entrance exam and singular professional entrance testing during quarantine period connected to spreading of coronavirus disease Covid-19”.

Decree № 50 of Chief state sanitary doctor of Ukraine from 22<sup>nd</sup> August 2020 “About approval of counter-epidemic actions in educational establishments during the quarantine period connected to the spreading of coronavirus disease Covid-19” determines order of educational establishments of all levels (pre-school, secondary, professional, pre-higher, higher, out-of-school) visiting depending on the level of danger (red, orange, yellow, green zones).

Decree № 50 of Chief state sanitary doctor of Ukraine from 22<sup>nd</sup> September 2020 “About approval of counter-epidemic actions in pre-school educational establishments during quarantine period connected to spreading of coronavirus disease Covid-19”.

Decree № 4 of Chief state sanitary doctor of Ukraine from 23<sup>rd</sup> April 2020 “About approval of counter-epidemic actions in pre-school educational establishments during quarantine period connected to the spreading of coronavirus disease Covid-19”.

### **Fourth level – Ministry of Education and Science (MES) of Ukraine**

Letter of MES from 12<sup>th</sup> October 2020 “About implementation of organizational counteractions to spreading of Covid-19” (Available at <https://mon.gov.ua/ua/npa/provzhittya-organizacijnih-zahodiv-iz-protidiyi-rozpovsyudzhennyu-covid-19>).

Letter of MES from 22<sup>nd</sup> February 2021 “Regarding prevention of acute respiratory disease Covid-19 caused by SARS-CoV-2 spreading and implementation of new restricting counter-epidemic actions” (Available at <https://mon.gov.ua/ua/npa/shodo-zapobigannyaposhirennuyugostroyi-respiratornoyi-hvorobi-covid-19-sprichinenoyi-koronavirusom-sarscov-2-ta-zaprovadzhennya-novih-obmezhuvalnih-protiepidemichnih-zahodiv> ).

Letter of MES from 17<sup>th</sup> May 2021 “Regarding vaccination of educators” (Available at <https://mon.gov.ua/ua/npa/shodo-vakcinaciyi-pracivnikiv-osviti> ).

Letter of MES from 18<sup>th</sup> May 2021 “Regarding vaccination of educators in higher education establishments” (Available at <https://mon.gov.ua/ua/npa/pro-vakcinaciyupracivnikiv-zakladiv-vishoyi-osviti> ).

**Fifth level – administration (departments of education) of territorial and local communities** which regulate the activities in educational establishments due to stage of Covid19 spreading in the region by their decrees.

There were general requirements for counter-epidemic security measures in establishments of extracurricular school, secondary school, professional pre-higher education, professional and higher education:

1. Providing everyday control of counter-epidemic measures among which the provision of protective masks (for 3 hours, 5 working days for one person), antiseptics. Pupils of elementary school (1 – 4 classes) were given permission to enter and walk around without protective masks. Providing conditions for minimization of infection risk: e.g. determining premises for separate preservation of outerwear, shoes for different age groups of pupils and workers of educational establishments, installation of bactericidal lamps, etc.).
2. Implementation of measures on social distance and avoidance of congestion aimed at minimization of contacts with other people: e.g. opening of several entrances to premises, markup on the floor, which facilitate organization of two-way traffic along corridor, distinguishing different zones for moving for different age categories of

pupils, if necessary different hours of beginning and finishing of lessons for different classes / groups; some lessons on fresh air, etc.

3. Obligatory inquiry of pupils about their health state before beginning of lessons by teachers; in case of symptoms of illness teachers should direct pupils to medical workers; obligatory thermometry for personnel of an educational establishment, prohibition of entrance to premises in case of temperature higher than 37,2 C.

4. Concerning the organization of the educational process – minimization of movement around premises, lessons for one class in one auditorium or in sub-groups using technologies of mixed learning, implementation of module approach in teaching.

Specific requirements for transportation of children and teachers to educational establishments, their nutrition and treatment of used items of individual protection, etc.

For *pre-school education establishments* requirements were stricter: temperature screening on the entrance and every 4 hours, morning reception and evening handing of a child outside of the premises, events were permitted in case of one person on 5 sq. meters, adaptive schedule, additional games aimed at improvement of physical state preferably on open air.

In Ukraine quarantine was officially proclaimed on 12<sup>th</sup> March 2020 and was prolonged by various Decrees till 30<sup>th</sup> June 2021. At the same time, starting from 24<sup>th</sup> February 2021 adaptive quarantine was proclaimed on the territory of Ukraine and the “yellow” level of epidemic danger was established with definite restrictions for educational establishments. It was prohibited to:

- visit educational establishments in case when more than 50 % of students / pupils and educators were on self-isolation because of a contact with a person with confirmed Covid-19.
- hold events (exhibitions, concerts) in educational establishments with the participation of pupils / students from more than one group and with observers.

On the territory of the regions with “red” level of epidemic danger in addition to the measures mentioned above, it was prohibited to visit educational establishments by pupils / students irrespective to its form of property, excluding pupils of pre-school educational establishments, special educational establishments, and pupils of 1 – 4 classes of general secondary educational establishments.

In Ukraine according to Commissioner for Human Rights in the Parliament of Ukraine there were 89 638 laboratory confirmed cases of child's infection on Covid-19 were registered for 31.03.2021, the beginning of quarantine. In general, in Ukraine 143463 laboratory confirmed cases of child's infection were registered for November 2021. 39 children did not recover from Covid-19 during 2020- 2021.

(see <http://gymnasia21.lutsk.ua/wpcontent/uploads/2021/11/vplyv-naslidkiv-pandemiyi-covid-19-na-prava-dytyny.pdf?fbclid=IwAR3zglKENmqV5angfvIscA9erHi8ZVo0ONpFvNcjp19qKfkGIzOXVZV8M2s> ).

### **Challenges of distance learning in conditions of pandemic Covid-19**

Distance learning, which became the main form of learning in educational establishments in conditions of pandemic, determined a range of new requirements to educators, pupils, parents. Several surveys among participants to the educational process were conducted aiming to reveal problems in the organization of distance learning, to determine possibilities of their fast solving and the development of corresponding recommendations.

Service of education ombudsman (education ombudsman in Ukraine serves to ensure compliance with rights in the system of education) conducted a survey among parents in the beginning of quarantine in April 2020. Its results showed that 85,1 % of children continue studying during quarantine though quarantine and induced implementation of distance learning sharpened range of problems which existed before:

- 1 .Technical problems.* Absence or obsolescence of computer equipment and programmes with 1/3 of families in which technical equipment for distant interaction is partly or totally absent. Part of families without technical equipment was higher in villages where there is often low quality of Internet and mobile connection.
- 2. Organizational and learning problems.* Unbalanced number of tasks and online lessons, inconsistency of schedule, obsolete textbooks not adapted for online learning,

absence of control over performing tasks, not always qualitative organization of distance learning without communication with a teacher, when tasks were sent or posted on website, application of unstandardized, non-unified educational content what complicates access to information and perception of learning material.

3. *Psychological*. Absence of motivation among children, the lack of the ability to study independently, lack of communication with teacher and peers, growth of aggression and intolerance in society.

For the sake of overcoming the problems mentioned above, the government of Ukraine implemented a range of measures. The Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine took into consideration the absence of home computers with Internet access among part of pupils especially in economically deprived families and in villages. It was decided to broadcast lessons by means of television. In particular, a range of TV channels supplied the broadcasting of lessons on disciplines included in independent external evaluation exams: Ukrainian language and literature, biology, mathematics, history.

Negotiations between the Ministry of Education and Science and leading educational online platforms led to supply of educators and pupils with educational content. Among partners which provided video content for broadcasting were the following platforms: BeSmart <https://besmart.study> ; studio of online education EdEra <https://www.ed-era.com> ; platform of mass open online courses Prometheus <https://prometheus.org.ua> ; platform of free of charge webinars for external independent evaluation preparation iLearn <https://ilearn.org.ua> , etc.

Starting from 11.12.2020, the Ministry of Education and Science in cooperation with the Ukrainian Institute of Education Development and Ministry of Digital Transformation of Ukraine launched a platform for distance and mixed learning All-Ukrainian school online ESCHOOL.net.ua <https://lms.e-school.net.ua/> . The main advantage of the platform are the lessons in 18 disciplines for 5 – 11 classes. All content passed expertise, corresponded state standards and the calendar plan. It was possible to learn free of charge only with Internet access which limited its accessibility for children who did not use Internet.

*Methodical supply of distance learning in conditions of pandemic.* In autumn 2020 members of the work group of MES of Ukraine in cooperation with the Scientific-Methodical sub-commission “Distance learning” of Sector for higher education Scientific-Methodical Council of MES of Ukraine developed “Recommendations for implementation of mixed learning in establishments of professional pre-higher and higher education” (Available at <https://mon.gov.ua/ua/osvita/visha-osvita/rekomendacij-shodo-vprovadzhennya-zmishanogonavchannya-u-zakladah-fahovoyi-peredvishoyi-ta-vishoyi-osviti> ). In conditions of quarantine restrictions to the number of lessons in auditoriums there were the following requirements for higher education: accessibility and inclusiveness; flexibility for separate categories of students who work, have children etc.; individual trajectory of learning; Dual education implementation.

Similar recommendations were developed for the establishments of general secondary education by “Renaissance” Foundation and MES of Ukraine (Available at [https://rada.info/upload/users\\_files/41919831/4c6d4edbb7e057a3ecea236cc72d989d.pdf](https://rada.info/upload/users_files/41919831/4c6d4edbb7e057a3ecea236cc72d989d.pdf) ).

It is worth mentioning that, in general, state bodies and civil organisations paid much attention to providing participants (educators and parents) to the educational process with information on actual issues of organization of educational process in conditions of pandemic. Thus, the “Education and Parenthood” page on the website of the Ministry of Health of Ukraine contained information on peculiarities of functioning of different spheres of societal life in conditions of pandemic and in particular institutions of education and family (Available at <https://covid19.gov.ua/osvita-ta-batkivstvo>). The Civic medical forum of Ukraine (Available at <https://covid19.com.ua/> ) contained general information about Covid-19.

Advice to parents concerned the creation of comfort space for a family in conditions of self-isolation through special rules of communication. Special attention was payed to issues of security and Internet dangers for children, which become more evident in conditions of distance learning.

The website of the Ministry of Education and Science contained the section “Security of children in Internet” for enhancing the level of awareness of parents and teachers (Available at <https://mon.gov.ua/ua/osvita/pozashkilna-osvita/vihovna-robotata-zahist-pravditini/bezpekaditej-v-interneti> ).



The chatbot “CiberDog” in Telegram and Viber helped children, parents and teachers to know how to act in case of cyberbullying and how to obtain help anonymously (Available at <https://gmail.us17.listmanage.com/track/click?u=cf7161388322f86bb23e61838&id=c9e0d458fe&e=36e974f3d9> ).

There were national hotline for children 0 800 500 225 (free of charge) and 116111 (free of charge from mobile phones), online consultation for teenagers in Teenergizer (Available at <https://gmail.us17.listmanage.com/track/click?u=cf7161388322f86bb23e61838&id=da6640f863&e=36e974f3d9> ).

The platform of digital education DIYA contains educational movies for parents “Safety of children in Internet” which shows how to protect children from destructive online content, cyberbullying, suicidal internet communities, sexual assault (Available at <https://osvita.diia.gov.ua/courses/serial-dlya-batkiv-onlayn-bezpeka-ditey> ).

The website of the Ministry of Digital Transformations presents instructions with advice for parents on its website (Available at <https://thedigital.gov.ua/news/zakhist-ditey-onlayn-pidchas-karantinu-mintsifra-prezentuvala-instruktsiyu-z-poradami-dlya-batkiv> ). It contains information about the most actual problems of the virtual life of children, ways of problems solving and online protection of children during quarantine.

Consequently, the results of the second anonymous online survey among 273 564 of participants to the educational process (pupils, parents, teachers and executives of educational establishments) regarding the dynamics of the quality of education during distance learning in conditions of quarantine, which was conducted by the State service of quality of education in Ukraine from 2<sup>nd</sup> till 9<sup>th</sup> February 2021, showed that in comparison with the previous year, the situation with provision and usage of learning materials improved (Available at <https://nus.org.ua/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/37776.pdf> ).

During the previous year only 8,9 % of executives indicated effective implementation of websites of educational establishments for communication with parents. The majority of school executives (69 %) used social networks and group chats for that and 4 % indicated that communication with parents was conducted through teachers, including sending emails with

schedule of lessons to parents (1,42 %). 52 % of teachers indicated that they regularly posted announcements and news in their personal blogs.

At the same time, most of the problems were not solved. Results of the survey conducted in 2021 showed that 31 % of teachers indicated that they did not have sufficient experience of implementing special curriculums, digital platforms; 16 % complained on the lack of experience in effective usage of computer equipment. 42 % of executives complained on insufficient digital infrastructure in an educational establishment and unstable Internet connection in school. 35 % indicated the lack of technical support of distance learning organization. Significant number of executives (40 %) and teachers (44 %) pointed at low motivation of pupils as one of the factors of insufficient quality of distance learning. 12 % of executives considered low digital competence among teachers as a factor which complicated organization of distance learning (Available at <https://nus.org.ua/wpcontent/uploads/2021/02/37776.pdf>).

The State Service of Education Quality presented results of 5 surveys with over half of a million respondents in the higher education sphere. These surveys showed that 2/3 of respondents (over 70 %) considered the level of educational process organization in 2021 to be significantly higher than the level which was supplied in 2020. At the same time, the State Service of Education Quality of Ukraine for the sake of enhancing the level of service with usage of technologies of distance learning suggested the following:

1. formation of information-digital competences among students of educational specializations and improvement of these competences among scientists and educators; support of development and implementation of digital means of teaching on state level; broadening usage of digital technologies during lessons;
2. inclusion indicators of IT-infrastructure development and implementation of digital means of learning in evaluation of executives of educational establishments.

In general, it is worth mentioning that, after a year of Covid-19 pandemic, technologies of distance and mixed learning became usual for educational establishments on different levels.

At the same time, the understanding and analysis of challenges faced by the Ukrainian system of education in the conditions of pandemic fostered distinguishing digital education directions:

overcoming unequal approach to informational-communicational technologies among educational establishments, educators, students and pupils, the necessity of united informational platform creation first of all for general secondary school, as well as other segments of education, the provision of safe and fast interaction between different educational databases, the creation of individual depersonalized databases about students and pupils, the educators and corresponding state registry (Available at <https://mon.gov.ua/storage/app/media/zagalna%20serednya/serpnevakonferencia/2020/metod-zbirka-osvita-ta-covid-2020.pdf> ).

For the sake of monitoring modern educational space, the state of the system of general secondary education reformation, the analysis of legislation in Ukraine Consulting Council on Promotion of Development of System of General Secondary Education was established by Decree of President of Ukraine № 55/2021 from 16<sup>th</sup> February 2021 (Available at <https://www.president.gov.ua/documents/552021-36669> ). The Consulting Council prepared suggestions regarding the accessibility and high level of general secondary education, the rights of the participants in the educational process, the improvement of legislation in Ukrainian general secondary education and the actualization of its main tasks.

The tasks of the Council were the following: provision of innovative development of general secondary education, formation of pupil's and student's competences, evaluation of pupil's learning results, provision of teacher's professional development, compliance with state guarantees on salaries, social and pension supply, etc. Besides those mentioned above, the Council will patronize the development of state-private partnership in the sphere of education, foster coordination of central and local power, educational establishments and other organizations working on development of contemporary and safe educational environment.

### **Social responsibility during Covid-19 pandemic in pre-war Ukraine: focus groups analysis**

The method of the focus groups was chosen for research of the educational policy and social responsibility, being one of the most appropriate procedures for studying this phenomena during Covid-19 pandemic. In the study, which was conducted during autumn 2021 – winter 2022, 4 focus groups were conducted. The total number of participants was 17 secondary school teachers from different regions of Ukraine, who previously agreed to answer questions on the

above topic. The focus groups were conducted online using the Zoom platform. Further analysis of the answers of the participants was done using video recordings, for which the consent of the teachers was previously obtained.

The participants of the focus groups were invited to discuss 7 main questions related to various aspects of educational policy and social responsibility during Covid-19 pandemic period in Ukraine.

1. Which were the roles of the teachers during online / distance schooling in the Covid-19 pandemic period?
2. Which were the advantages and disadvantages of learning online / distance schooling?
3. How did parents contribute / which were their responsibilities?
4. Which were the challenges for the vulnerable groups of children?
5. How did Ministry of Education and Science manage the situation during the pandemic crises?
6. How would you describe the responsibilities of students during the crises?
7. What should we keep from online / distance schooling during the pandemic period?

We started the discussion with the **roles of teachers during online / distance schooling in Covid-19 pandemic period**. Almost all participants noted the lack of readiness for distance learning in conditions of pandemic. Whilst some teachers felt supported by the school leaders and colleagues, they tried to act actively, involve students, study more in order to master new technologies, others noted the lack of necessary technical means and assistance at the first stage of the pandemic. Therefore, they had to make great efforts on their own to establish a context with students and involve them in learning.

*“The role of a teacher in a pandemic is to ensure learning in new conditions, to gain a new experience of interaction with students, to "feel" the children in distance learning conditions, and to support them morally so that they do not lose interest in learning. To do this, teachers had to develop, learn to work remotely, experiment with new gadgets,*

*and try to find resources, technical capabilities, and teaching tools to interest children.”*  
(T1UA)

The roles of teachers during the Covid-19 pandemic were to ensure learning in new conditions, to gain the new experience of interaction with students, to "feel" the children in distance learning conditions, and to support them morally, so that they do not lose interest in learning. To do this, teachers had to develop skills, learn to work remotely, experiment with new gadgets, and try to find resources, technical capabilities, and teaching tools to keep interest of children on learning process.

The discussion on **advantages and disadvantages of distance schooling** showed particular importance of stress and communication. All participants noted the stress and communication problems in the conditions of pandemic, especially in its first stage. Several teachers indicated possible health problems due to prolonged working hours on the computer. In the process of adaptation to the conditions of pandemic, teachers understood the advantages of distance learning, starting from saving time on the way to school and ending with opportunities for professional self-development through the need to develop new skills to improve learning and mastering learning material.

*“Advantages: saving time (no need to spend time for getting to work), more opportunities to acquire additional information, use of vivid visualization thanks to various applications and Internet technologies, individualization of learning, stimulation of self-development of teachers and students due to the need to develop new applications to improve learning and mastering learning material.”*

*“Disadvantages: 1) it was difficult to control all students, establish feedback with them, and respond flexibly, especially since students were allowed to turn off the camera and sound during the lesson, 2) lack of full-fledged social connections with peers, primarily for those students who live in the city, as a result - difficulty in socialization, which is especially clearly visible in elementary school students who started studying in conditions of pandemic. In addition, uncontrolled stay at computer for a long time can have negative effect on health.”* (T2UA)

School teachers mentioned that the **contribution of parents and their responsibility** depended on the attitude of parents towards children and school. Comments reflected that most parents were responsible and monitored their children's attendance of classes and their homework, but some parents attempted to shift responsibility to the school and made constant complaints over time. Parents, who worked mostly remotely, began to experience difficulties due to being at home in a relatively small area with their children at the same time.

*“Most parents are responsible and monitor their children's attendance on classes and their homework. However, in the beginning of transition to distance learning there were many complaints from parents who were unhappy that their children were at home. Quite a large number of parents complained that they did not know how to help their children since they did not have new technologies, they transferred the responsibility to the teacher.” (T3UA)*

Practically all teachers noted the problems of vulnerable groups of pupils in distance learning conditions, related to the lack of gadgets, Internet connection, low motivation to study, etc. Only certain children from well-off families, who had high intellectual activity and limited mobility, received certain advantages.

*“Not all such children have access to distance learning due to lack of appropriate gadgets and Internet. The responsibility of such children decreased, especially those who needed constant additional control, which is difficult to provide even in the presence of an assistant teacher.” (T4UA)*

**The ability of Ministry of Education and Science to cope with Covid-19 pandemic** challenges in education process was described by the schoolteachers the following way. The first stage of the pandemic was a shock for all participants of education process, due to the unpreparedness for distance learning. General recommendations were given regarding the conditions for the organization of training, duration of lessons, and safety equipment, but the main responsibility fell on the shoulders of teachers who had to master new methods and technologies independently. The state provided the necessary equipment only for primary classes, although not all teachers have laptops and can purchase them at their own expense. On the one hand, teachers were given right to choose means, methods, and forms of education. On

the other hand, there was lack of uniformed requirements and algorithm of actions what made organization of professional teacher training difficult, especially for older teachers.

*“Firstly, we were all confused and did not know how to get out of the situation. The Ministry gave general recommendations on how to organize the process, how to ensure safety of participants in the educational process, but all responsibility was placed on teachers. Teachers had to independently choose technologies, software, etc. Only primary school was provided better.” (T5UA)*

In the description of the **responsibilities of students** during the Covid-19 crisis, definite polarization was observed: motivated children learned better and for the unmotivated pupils the quality of learning decreased, such children did not want to attend classes and formally joined lessons with camera and microphone turned off. Some children could not attend remote classes due to the lack of gadgets.

*“Those children who wanted to study perceived the situation as a challenge and redoubled their efforts. Those children who did not show success in learning, as a rule, sharply reduced their activity, attended lessons formally, turned off cameras and microphones, did not participate in communication during lessons.” (T6UA)*

Discussion on **what should be kept from online / distance schooling** showed that online / distance schooling during the pandemic period was necessary, as it allowed to teach children who were at home in conditions of isolation, what contributed to the safety of their health. The idea that distance learning could be an additional form of learning not only in crisis conditions, was noted.

*“This is a forced option that will not replace live learning, but still learning takes place in safe conditions. Distance education can be an additional form of education in certain conditions.” (T7UA)*

## Conclusions

Negative attitudes towards forced distance learning in conditions of the Covid-19 pandemic were reported by about half of the educational process participants. Negative attitudes primarily concerned the lack of direct, "live" communication and issues of psychological safety. Combination of face-to-face and distance learning was considered as optimal and psychologically safe.

At the same time, the understanding of the necessity of transition to distance learning increased as well as growth of social responsibility among most educational process participants. During the Covid-19 pandemic positive dynamics in technological aspects of digital education were accompanied by the implementation of new digital distant technologies. It became particularly important for educational institutions of all levels during the war period in Ukraine.

The Covid-19 pandemic period in Ukraine fostered digital transformations in the system of education and science a lot. The digital transformations introduced during the Covid-19 pandemic are very useful for maintaining the educational process in conditions of war when education is largely distant.

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## RECOMMENDATIONS

Dealing with a health crisis is not something unprecedented for the global community and a review of past years can confirm this. The diversification of the Covid-19 pandemic is due to a demanding bet that governments have been asked to serve to manage the phenomenon of social distancing of people, while at the same time exploiting the possibilities provided by new technologies. This involved the direct coordination of many people from different groups (educational officials, teachers, students, and parents) to operate in new and uncharted waters. Distance education was implemented by most countries as the most convenient solution, which in our country took various forms (synchronous, asynchronous, radio, and educational TV programs). Nevertheless, the proposed solution could be nothing more than a temporary emergency act, since it came in response to the total movement bans that prevailed in the country at the current period, but also to meet the need for the social distancing of people to protect themselves from the transmission of the disease. The fact that this option was an emergency solution, which tried to respond to existing problems that force educational communities to adopt immediate, temporary different strategic priorities in the educational process (Bozkurt & Sharma 2020), was also evident from the carelessness with which it was implemented at the beginning since both teachers and students were asked to manage digital tools that they did not even know.

It is worth mentioning that the educational community managed to shoulder the burden of the new reality and by making superhuman efforts and spending valuable personal time and effort, managed to respond immediately to the new requirements. The pressure was increased, and the material means were meagre. The same was true for institutional support, which was little and delayed. Teachers have had to face the task of their training largely alone. The struggle of the participants in the educational process to respond to their new tasks had the effect of digitally empowering the educational community since it managed to enrich the professional skills of the teachers who in a very short period managed to educate themselves on the new data and apply new educational methods. In addition, through distance education, the students were also empowered and managed to increase their autonomy and their responsibility regarding the obligations arising from their new school reality.

In this context, the contribution of the director of the school unit was decisive since they were called to fulfil multiple roles. On the one hand, having the role of team leader, responsible for empowering all participants of the educational community to assume roles, leaving behind personal beliefs, and on the other hand having the role of controller from the state, strictly recording absences, informing about cases, and checking medical certificates. This often resulted in the creation of conflicts which hindered the smooth outcome of the necessary procedures.

Another aspect of the educational process in conditions of social isolation caused by the Covid-19 pandemic was accompanied by the decrease of the psychological well-being among all participants of educational process: teachers, pupils, and parents. The acuteness of the issue of ensuring the psychological well-being among all participants of educational process has significantly increased in connection with the transition to distance learning in the conditions of the Covid-19 pandemic due to the specific features of the digital educational environment, which, on the one hand, provided the opportunity for every student to have access to education at any time and build an individual learning trajectory, and on the other hand, it created a favourable basis for manifestations of psychological violence, cyberbullying, mass manipulative influences etc.

One of our recommendations is the combination of online teaching with techniques of psychological support, which could both decrease the stress caused by distance learning and foster mastering the main learning material (Bondarevska, Mykhaylenko, 2020). Even in distance learning it is possible to find space for incorporating art in teaching and learning. Online galleries can be one of numerous examples of art techniques which can be used for enriching discussions on arbitrary topics and at the same time for decreasing stress by observing psychologically positive images.

Another recommendation for all participants of the educational process is the constant mastering of new instruments implemented in distance learning. Keeping technical skills updated increases the efficacy of teaching and learning and reduces the stress in sudden situations caused by technical problems which inevitably occur in distance learning. The educational process in times of isolation is accompanied by the blurring limits of working hours and enhanced by online communication. That can lead to burnout and decrease of the psychological well-being dramatically. Keeping working hours and online work

communication limited is an important prophylaxis of burnout, which enhances work productivity in longer perspective.

One of the most problematic aspects of education during the time of the pandemic crisis was that of disadvantaged, vulnerable children, who had the most difficult situation, concerning both the lack of resources and the lack of support from parents, teachers, and institutions. As a recommendation following such a crisis situation, educational institutions, and bodies in charge of educational management, should continue to monitor these categories and offer support in terms of access to technology and connectivity, so the improvements of certain situations during the Covid-19 crisis would have benefits in the long term. One of the reports issued by the UNESCO refers to this specific issue: "the right to education so that it addresses the importance of connectivity and access to knowledge and information.(2020. *Education in a post-COVID world: Nine ideas for public action*). Moreover, the access to technology, open educational resources and digital tools should continue to be made available, both for students and teachers. It is important that we keep the positive aspects this period has brought and one of these is about technology and new ways of teaching and learning.

And one of the most important aspects of the period refers to the teaching profession and to the essential roles of teachers. Therefore, in line with the UNESCO recommendations, we believe that a period of crisis shows their value, and that the teacher's contribution must be appreciated: "Value the teaching profession and teacher collaboration. There has been remarkable innovation in the responses of educators to the COVID-19 crisis, with those systems most engaged with families and communities showing the most resilience. We must encourage conditions that give frontline educators autonomy and flexibility to act collaboratively." (2020. *Education in a post-COVID world: Nine ideas for public action*)

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