

Romanian Education in Times of Pandemic

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ABSTRACT: In Romania, face-to-face courses in preschool, primary, secondary, high school, vocational, post-secondary and higher education have been suspended since the beginning of the state's declaration of emergency by the country's president, but the educational process continued through technology-assisted learning until the end of the semester when the school/university year courses ended. Students and teachers who did not have access to technology received support from schools, school inspectorates, town halls etc. The students continued the technology-assisted learning, and the exams could be taken online, remaining at the discretion of each higher education institution. The Romanian education system was not prepared to provide the favorable framework for an efficient and qualitative online educational act for all participants, the quality of face-to-face learning being far superior to those in times of pandemic.

KEYWORDS: research, education, teaching, online, pandemic

Introduction

The Romanian education system consists of all state and private education units and institutions of various types, levels and forms of organization of training and education. It is structured in educational levels to ensure the coherence of instruction and education according to the age and individual characteristics of pupils and students (Eurydice 2019).

Pre-university education is an integral part of the national education established as a system, bringing together state, private and denominational education units, authorized or accredited. It is organized by levels, forms of education and, as the case may be, courses and profiles, ensuring the necessary conditions for the acquisition of key competencies and for progressive professionalization. *Early education* (0-6 years) consists of pre-school level (0 - 3 years) and preschool education (3-6 years), which includes the small group, middle group and large group and takes place in nurseries, kindergartens and centers day, state or private, according to the same educational content and according to the same national standards. *Preschool education* is carried out in kindergartens or in schools (state or private), which have as section pre-school education groups, according to the same curriculum and respecting the same national standards. *Primary education* is the first stage of compulsory education and includes the preparatory class and grades I-IV. *Secondary education* is a component part of compulsory general education and includes grades V-VIII. *High school education* includes the following fields and profiles: theoretical field (humanistic and real profiles); technological chain (technical profiles, services, natural resources and environmental protection) and vocational chain (military, theological, sports, artistic and pedagogical profiles). Special education and special integrated education is an integral part of the national education system in Romania and offers all children/students/young people educational programs adapted to the degree of disability and their development needs, being organized at all levels of pre-university education, depending on the type and degree of disability (mental, auditory, visual, locomotor, associated). *Non-university tertiary education (post-secondary education)* is organized in post-secondary schools with legal personality or as structures without legal personality, in high schools with legal personality, or in colleges within accredited higher education institutions, with a duration of 1-3 years, in depending on the complexity of the qualification (cnred.edu.ro).

Higher education is organized in universities, study academies, institutes, higher education schools, which have obtained provisional operation authorization or accreditation.

The undergraduate degree programs represent the first cycle of university studies. Master's degree programs represent the second cycle of university studies. PhD studies represent the third cycle of university studies, they can be organized in the form of full-time and part-time education, with a duration of 3 years (cnred.edu.ro).

In accordance with the provisions of the National Education Law, home schooling is possible for: children, pupils and young people with chronic illnesses or illnesses that require hospitalization periods longer than four weeks are organized, as appropriate, groups or classes in the health unit in who are hospitalized; children, pupils and young people who, due to medical reasons or due to a disability, are not displaced, home schooling is organized for a determined period; homeschooling, respectively the establishment of classes or groups in hospitals are done by the school inspectorate, according to a framework methodology developed by the Ministry of Education (edu.ro).

Carrying out teaching activities during the state of emergency and alert in Romania

On March 16, 2020, the President of Romania issued the first decree on the establishment of the state of emergency on the entire territory of the country for a period of 30 days (Decree no 195 of March 16, 2020 on the establishment of the emergency situation on the territory of Romania, published in Official Gazette no 212 of March 16, 2020. After the end of this period, it issued a new decree, which extended the state of emergency until May 14, 2020 (Decree no 240 of April 14, 2020 on the extension of the state of emergency in Romania, published in the Official Gazette no 311 of 14 April 2020). In art. 2 of the latter decree, provides that "In order to prevent the spread of COVID-19 and in order to manage the consequences, in relation with the evolution of the epidemiologic situation, for the duration of the state of emergency, the exercise of the following rights is restricted, proportionally with the degree in which the criteria mentioned in Article 3, paragraph 5, is accomplished: a) Freedom of movement; b) Right to intimate, family and private life; c) Inviolability of home; d) Right to education; e) Freedom of assembly; f) Right to strike; g) Right of private property; h) Economic freedom."

In Annex no 1 - *First emergency measures with direct applicability* from Decree no. 240 of April 14, 2020, Chapter X - *The field of education and research*, is provided in art. 77-80 that - "During the state of emergency, all teaching activities that require the physical presence of preschoolers, preschoolers, pupils and students in educational institutions and institutions are suspended; The pre-university education units organize, as far as possible, the development of activities from the curricula, in online format. The development of these activities, as well as the way of recovering the elements that cannot be covered during this period are established by the Ministry of Education and Research; the higher education institutions from the national education system, based on the university autonomy, respecting the quality of the didactic act and assuming the public responsibility, will use alternative didactic methods of teaching-learning-evaluation, in online format; The teaching activities such as laboratories, projects, research activities, which require the direct interaction, in the university space, of the students with the teachers and research will be recovered after the cessation of the state of emergency".

At the end of the second period of the state of emergency, Romania entered the state of alert. Law no 55/2020 on some measures to prevent and combat the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, published in the Official Gazette, Part I no. 396 of 15 May 2020, in force since 18 May 2020, provides in Section 5 - *The field of education and research* in art. 38 that "during the state of alert, teaching activities that require the physical presence of ante-preschoolers, preschoolers, pupils and students in educational units and institutions may be suspended, at the proposal of CNSSU, by joint order of the Minister of Education and Research and the Minister of Health. (2) The duration of the suspension provided in par. (1) may exceed the

duration of the alert state, depending on the remaining period of the school year and the stage of the educational process”.

In the same law is provided in art. 39 para. (1) that “from the date of entry into force of this law and until the elimination of restrictions on public meetings by the relevant authorities, pre-university education units organize activities in curricula and online. (2) In the situation where the activities cannot be carried out according to the provisions of par. (1), in order to ensure equal access to education, the school inspectorates/school inspectorate of Bucharest and pre-university education units have the obligation to provide educational resources for students who do not have access to technology, in accordance with the instructions of the Minister of Education and Research. (3) Carrying out the activities provided in par. (2), as well as the way of recovering the contents from the school curricula that cannot be covered during this period shall be established by the Ministry of Education and Research”.

This law also refers to higher education, in art. 40 as follows: “During the alert state, as well as throughout the academic year 2019-2020, higher education institutions in the national education system, based on university autonomy while respecting to the quality of the didactic act, they can use alternative didactic methods teaching-learning-evaluation, in online format, in accordance with Government Emergency Ordinance no 58/2020 on taking measures for the proper functioning of the education system, published in the Official Gazette, Part I no. 347 of April 29, 2020. Also, the final exams for the bachelor’s, masters or postgraduate studies, the defense of doctoral thesis, the defense of habilitation thesis can be conducted online”.

The pandemic of the new coronavirus put Romanian education in front of new challenges and the need to adapt quickly to them. Many of the schools in Romania were not prepared to face the new situation, in the sense that in rural areas, in certain areas, there were no decent learning conditions in previous years, there were no hygienic-sanitary conditions, they operated without medical offices, and in the urban environment there were and are overcrowded classes. To these is added the absence of an integrated form of the program that allows online learning.

During the state of emergency and later during the state of alert, until the summer holidays, when schools were closed, many pupils did not participate in online schooling, especially in rural areas. But there were also happy cases where the online school was made, between March and June, on the phone and, in some cases on the tablet, after teachers and parents mobilized, or through donations from some companies to help pupils to attend classes. The problem is that we do not have a proper endowment at the national level.

Where pupils did not have access to the Internet and the devices needed to attend online school, teachers sought solutions to continue lessons during the state of emergency. One of them is the “store” method - the teachers left the worksheets at a store, where they were picked up by a parent, and the solved topics were taught again at the store (Europa Liberă quoted by SparkNews.ro 2020).

The biggest problems reported by students, parents and teachers were the lack of devices and internet connection. Thus, students did not have tablets or laptops, less powerful phones could not be used efficiently for all applications and platforms, and the internet connection was either completely missing or had interruptions. There are schools that, although they had an internet connection, did not have wireless throughout the school, and the teacher could not do hybrid classes in the classroom. There was no technical quality, the students could not hear or heard intermittently, they could not see the board, the image could not be enlarged, and the examples could go on. On the other side, of the teachers, things did not get better, in the sense that some did not have computers to transmit classes online, and the existing ones in schools were old and did not work properly. Where there were possibilities, some teachers began to teach at a distance from the very first weeks of the state of emergency. However, most waited until after the Easter holidays, when the Ministry of Education issued an order in this regard. Others did not do so until the end of the school year.

Many of them did not have the necessary materials, others could not adapt to the new learning methods, they said that they do not want to go online, that it is possible to be registered and in the end many retired early. Unfortunately, these problems were also in the urban environment. The pandemic context brought other difficulties, such as the impossibility to recover the subject from the previous school year, or the impossibility to adapt all the subjects to the online teaching. There is no national platform, accessible to all. Therefore each teacher worked with the students as he thought was best (Ruxanda 2020). Teachers used various applications or platforms in the teaching process with WhatsApp, Zoom, Google Classroom, Google Meet, Microsoft Teams, organized video conferences with Meet or Teams, used the virtual board with Google Jam board or Microsoft Whiteboard. Zoom classes, uploaded pictures as pictures on WhatsApp or Google Classroom, and photos with notebooks sent back by parents are far from a true learning and digitization process in education. The teacher must use materials specifically designed for digital education, so as to create that interactivity, to provide and receive feedback. They must have a method of distributing materials, sorting them into categories so that each student has access to them and works on their own worksheet.

According to art. 11 of the Decision of the National Committee for Emergency Situations no 28 of June 11, 2020 on the proposal of the necessary relaxation measures in the current epidemiological context, applicable from June 15, 2020, allowed activities in nurseries, kindergartens and after-school during the summer holidays, under conditions established by joint order with the Minister of Education and Research, the Minister of Health and the Minister of Labor and Social Protection. As a consequence, the Ministry of Education and Research has developed a guide for organizing preschool education units in the public system for receiving and involving children in recreational activities during the summer holidays.

According to the Ministry of Education, the access of parents/relatives to the interior of the kindergarten or school was not allowed, and the children were taken from the gate of the school by a person appointed by the principal and, in the same way, at the end, they were led to the exit.

For kindergartens, it is mentioned the realization of well delimited and signalized routes inside the educational unit (even in the group room) and in the afferent space in the yard. At the same time, there will be a maximum of 20 children with 2 adults in the group rooms. In kindergartens with a normal schedule (5 hours/day), children come with the food package from home and it is usually served at 10.00. Children or staff members who present with suspected SARS-CoV-2 disease will be isolated until they leave the school, in accordance with the recommendations in force.

On July 27, 2020, the Romanian Senate adopted the project according to which the activities carried out in pre-university and university education can also be carried out online in the situation where a state of emergency or siege is established, according to the constitutional provisions. In these situations, the activities carried out in preschool and school education, but also those in university education can be done online, to ensure the exercise of the fundamental right to education provided in art. 32 of the Romanian Constitution.

In September, with three days before the opening of the schools, the Ministry of Education made public the situation of the scenarios that will be applied in the educational units on the entire Romanian territory. The scenarios proposed by the Ministry of Education are three in number, as follows (HotNews 2020):

Scenario 1 (0-1 cases) provides for the daily participation of all preschoolers and students in schools, in compliance with and application of all protection rules.

Scenario 2 (1-3 cases) - daily participation of all preschoolers and students in primary education, students in grades VIII and XII, in compliance with and application of all rules of

protection and partial return (by rotation of 1-2 weeks) of students from other high school and high school classes, in compliance with and application of all protection rules.

Scenario 3 (3-50 cases) provides for the participation of all preschoolers and students in online activities/lessons.

Starting with September 14, 2020, the students returned to the classrooms in special conditions, differing from one school to another. However, they had three essential things in common: wearing a mask so as to cover both the nose and mouth; the physical distance to be kept at least 1 meter indoors, with the obligation to wear a mask, and at least 1.5 meters outdoors, when not wearing a mask; hands should be sanitized or disinfected whenever students touch an area that could be infected such as handles, railings, elevator buttons.

Students should always sit in the same place in the classroom and avoid touching their classmates' objects, chairs and benches. They must also disinfect their hands each time they touch common objects or surfaces, such as chalk, sponge, board, keyboard, mouse etc.

Pupils who show symptoms of the disease should not attend school or university. Parents/students have the obligation to notify the school as well as the family doctor. Students who are part of risk groups in case of infection with the new coronavirus (COVID-19), or live with people who are in risk groups, can go to school online, based on a request from parents.

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Unfortunately, the rules imposed by the pandemic were violated from the first day of school, in many locations in the country, particularly physical distancing compliance, at the entrance to schools. Moreover, in some places, although students and parents were very close, they did not wear protective masks.

The school started differently for the students, in the sense that for some of them it started safely, where the school principals and the local authorities assumed responsibilities and respected them, namely they made sure to have healthy spaces, to have tablets for students and disinfectants for the school space. But for many other students, especially those in rural areas, the school did not start in a safe and quality environment, as they do not have large enough budgets to cover all current needs.

In larger cities, such as Bucharest, Timișoara, Iași, Cluj-Napoca, Sibiu, Brașov, most schools started the new year in a hybrid system, so the students did the shift - that is, some students in the classroom and another part they watched the lesson in real time, from home.

If in the big cities the schools were prepared for the hybrid scenario, in the rural environment the principals opted rather for the green scenario, especially since there the number of students is smaller, the distance can be ensured more easily, and the online school is more difficult to put implementation, provided that not all students have access to the Internet or electronic devices.

Ten days after the start of the school year, the number of schools in the red scenario, where online classes are held, was 39 times higher than at the beginning of the school year, the number of schools in the yellow scenario decreased by 509, and the number of schools in the scenario green increased by 525 (Cornea 2020).

In universities, things have been completely different, they have been organized much better, since the beginning of the pandemic, especially in private universities. The resumption of teaching activities for which the physical presence of students/trainees is required requires a wide commitment in society, in the context of the importance of equitable access to education, and, at the same time, a responsibility by each higher education institution by virtue of university autonomy.

Conclusions

All specialists warned that an increase in coronavirus cases is expected in the next period due to the start of schools. There are calls over calls for responsibility and observance of the rules, but also for maintaining this conduct at home, after returning from school. Experts point out that the virus has been milder in children, but quite a few things are still known and developments are quite unpredictable. The key date for this important step in the context of the pandemic would be around October 1.

Principals and teachers felt the pressure on their shoulders and tried to prepare the schools as best they could, with the resources they had, so that the students would suffer as little as possible. At the same time, they are afraid of getting sick, especially since, as a rule, there are few young teachers. The circle of weaknesses is filled by other shortcomings: in most schools the unskilled staff, who have to ensure the cleanliness of classrooms and common areas, is insufficient.

Also, the technique must be constantly improved, but also the continuous training of teachers in order to use all the tools at our disposal. At the same time, students must be trained how to use various applications or online platforms.

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