SCHOOL ORGANIZATIONS IN THE PANDEMIC CRISIS COVID-19. CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Nicuşor, Diaconu[1]
Melania-Andreea, Stănciulescu (Diaconu)[2]

Abstract

The spread of infection with the SARS-CoV-2 virus at the beginning of 2020 led the governments of the European states to take drastic measures to limit mobility by instituting quarantine and isolation measures, and in state institutions, including educational ones, physical presence was excluded, including in Romania.

The continuation of the activities, implicitly the didactic ones, had to be carried out through online activities, a situation in which School Effectiveness becomes a difficult concept to measure, because it is related to different criteria, defined according to the specifics of each school unit, the results of the students and the added value by the school institution. The uncertainty in which each school organization evolved did not only have a negative impact on the quality of the educational act, but had much more complex implications and, certainly, echoes in the medium and long term.

At the moment, over the echo of the pandemic crisis, the energy crisis and the threat of an imminent economic crisis overlap. The present work aims to highlight the importance of quality assurance in European (and implicitly Romanian) pre-university education, in crisis situations.

Key words: crisis, uncertainty, education reform, quality, resilience.

JEL Classification: H12, I28

1. Introduction

Along with Romania's integration into the European Union, issues of effectiveness and efficiency of our education system also arose, issues that came back into sharp focus with the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. To understand the scale of the impact of this crisis on education systems, an analysis must look at several basic aspects, such as:

• The standard of living of the population - the level of well-being and technology has increased in recent years, but the number of people living in poverty is still quite high. The chances of recovery lie in the creation of an effective education system (Holmberg, J., 2017).

• Globalization - society's activities, including education, operate in close dependence worldwide; globalization implies a high level of culture and civilization of different peoples, a fact that is impossible to achieve without an effective education system (Agasisti,T., 2011).

• Unemployment rate - the professional training of an individual is related to unemployment; a priori, we can state that unemployment rates decrease as the individual's professional and educational training increases; an ineffective educational system leads to a low level of education, which explains the level of the unemployment rate in a country (Dandeș, A.A., 2017).

• Educational management - the field of education has undergone, in the last 20 years, many structural and content changes, accompanied by updates of the concepts with which it operates. Thus, the notion of administration - which has become much less comprehensive - is replaced by educational management, then, more recently, educational leadership joins.

• Educational leadership - Practice has demonstrated that real leadership and quality management are decisive factors in differentiating educational organizations that evolve in similar conditions and even more so when they evolve in crisis situations. The role of leaders is to determine to what extent the organizations they lead are prepared to face the challenges and - at the same time - to develop the skills necessary to manage them. In education, leadership must undertake irreversible transformations, based on the personal and educational

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[1] PhD Student, VALAHIA University, Târgoviște, Romania, e-mail: diaconu.nicusor@yahoo.com
[2] PhD Student, VALAHIA University, Targoviste, Romania, e-mail: mellandreea@yahoo.com

values of the leaders(Bennis, 1989), transposed into institutional objectives and doubled by visionary strategies; what must be remembered is that – unlike other fields – education is a strategic field, with centralized policies and strategies. Here, the leader's ability to harmonize his own vision with the national strategy and to deliver the organization the way to a quality education, beyond the limitations of the system, comes into play.

The Covid-19 epidemic, which started at the end of 2019 in China and spread rapidly around the globe, had a strong impact on European states (and not only); according to a UNICEF report, in 20 countries in Europe and Central Asia schools were closed and in 19 countries pre-school education units were closed, thus affecting 49.8 million children (Regional Office of the United Nations Fund for Children (UNICEF) for Europe and Central Asia) (2020). The effects are still felt today, even if, officially, the pandemic episode has been overcome. Thus, the education systems were forced to update quickly, in a context characterized by uncertainty, lack of procedures and limited resources, with the objective of ensuring access to education for all children and the quality of the teaching process.

2. The response of European education systems in a pandemic context

The spread of the infection with the SARS-CoV-2 virus led the governments of the European states to take drastic measures to limit mobility and carry out current activities, calling for a preventive approach rather than one based on certain data. Therefore, quarantine and isolation measures were instituted in many European countries and others, and educational institutions were closed, including in Romania. These measures had to be countered by ensuring some measures to continue the didactic process, in the online system. This required educational platforms as well as devices and tools to facilitate access to online learning. The World Health Organization recommends in its documents the adoption of a system based on risk analysis, a system that takes into account several factors when deciding to reopen schools: the vaccination rate, epidemiological factors, the state and capacity of the public health system, community participation , as well as the government's ability to provide social and economic support to the most disadvantaged categories. Also, through the Framework Document initiated by the institutions of the UN system, the resumption of the educational process in physical spaces was supported, drawing attention to the negative effects of the interruption of education, as follows:

• Disrupting the educational interaction in the classroom can have a major effect on the child's learning ability;

• The longer marginalized children stay away from school, the less likely they are to return to schools;

• Pupils from the poorest families are five times more likely to drop out of primary school compared to those from rich families;

• Non-participation in school activity increases the risk of teenage pregnancy, sexual exploitation, child marriage, violence and other threats;

• Prolonged closure of schools disrupts the provision of essential services that depend on school activity such as immunization, nutrition, mental and psychosocial medical support, potentially causing stress and anxiety, due to loss of interaction with colleagues and interruption of daily routine;

• The negative effects will be significantly worse for marginalized children, such as those living in conflict zones or experiencing protracted crises, from migrant, forcibly relocated, minority families, children with disabilities or institutionalized children.

2.1. The Romanian school, in a pandemic context

In Romania, the decision to close schools at the outbreak of the pandemic, in march 2020(CNSSU, 2020), was accompanied, in most cases, by the organization of remote teaching

activities, in extremely diverse conditions, with or without the use of electronic means for teaching and communication . The appeal to this crisis solution and home isolation has put teachers, children and parents in a new position, the learning results in the second semester of the 2019-2020 school year being, in most cases, unsatisfactory, compared with face-to-face learning from the periods before the crisis generated by the Covid-19 pandemic. Also, in the absence of similar studies and experiments, the dramatic situation in the months of March-June in Romanian education, as well as the delay in the implementation of firm preparation and prevention measures during the school holidays (June-September) have seriously called into question the start of the new school year in mid-September, as had been established by order of the minister before the outbreak of the pandemic. Despite these justified fears, the Romanian Government has decided that the educational process in physical spaces will be resumed. The solution proposed by the Government of Romania, with the resumption of the educational process in physical school spaces, is part of the global and European consensus in this regard, learning in a physical regime, face to face, being for our country the only method tested and known by all educational actors through which can ensure a relatively accessible and quality education.

The new school year 2021-2022 started in September 2021 with physical presence, but according to the forecasts during the summer - when an explosion of cases of infection with the Delta variant was announced in October - the situation became acute, again, in the middle of the tenth month . At this point, the Government's strategy has changed, leaving to the choice of the school units, respectively the Board of Administration, the type of continuation of the didactic process, respectively with physical presence or at a distance: according to the joint Order of the Ministry of Health and Education, No. 5338/01.10.2021, amended on 05.11.2021 for the approval of the measures to organize the activity within educational units/institutions under epidemiological safety conditions for the prevention of illness with the SARS-CoV-2 virus, the operating scenario of the educational unit/institution during the school/university year, it will be updated according to the confirmed cases of illness with the SARS-CoV-2 virus in a class/group/educational unit, the County School Inspectorates/School Inspectorate of the Municipality of Bucharest (ISJ/ISMB) and the directions of public health/Directorate of Public Health of the Municipality of Bucharest (DSP/DSPMB) approves the proposal of the board of directors of the pre-university education unit/related and forwards for approval to the county committees for emergency situations/the Committee of the Municipality of Bucharest for Emergency Situations (CJSU/CMBSU), the operating scenario for each educational unit. Also, starting on November 8, 2021, it was decided that the resumption of classes will be done online for all pre-university education units where less than 60% of the staff is vaccinated. The uncertainty in which each school organization evolved did not only have a negative impact on the quality of the educational act, but had much more complex implications and, certainly, echoes in the medium and long term. Schools are not only an environment in which didactic processes take place, but also an environment for learning social and emotional skills, an environment for interaction and social support. Referring to the complexity of the school institution, as we outlined it, closing schools not only disrupted the education process of children, but also limited access to various social and medical programs run through the school, deepening social inequalities. The way in which the teaching staff, the management of the educational units, the managers of the education system and the decision-makers at the local and governmental level have managed to face these challenges will have an impact on the direct beneficiaries of the education services, the students, and - inevitably - on the communities of which they are a part; the whole society will feel in the medium and long term, from an economic point of view, but also from a social point of view, the impact of the decisions taken in this unprecedented crisis situation. Thus, a better resilience of the education system can be obtained by planning with

priority a quality inclusive education system for the categories of marginalized beneficiaries or at risk of marginalization; starting from this principle, the foundations can be laid for resetting and rebuilding a better performing education and better schools.

3. Future strategies for quality inclusive education

The crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has hit pre-university education systems across the European Union. In this complex situation, the resources available to Member States, through recovery and resilience mechanisms, are essential for the necessary reforms, so that European education systems become more resilient, flexible and adaptable. In Romania, it is becoming increasingly important to use all available funds to finance education reform. In addition to the amount available under the Recovery and Resilience Mechanism, the amount available under the Operational Program "Education and Employment" for the period 2021-2027(PNRR, 2021) will be directed towards the modernization and development of the educational infrastructure, in parallel with the change in the teaching- learning and the development of innovative educational resources aimed at increasing the efficiency of the education system, keeping the quality of education in the foreground. To support these national efforts, the European context offers an opportunity to link the Romanian education system to the evolving trends of society and the economy of the future. The European Union Action Plan for Digital Education 2021-2027(U.E., 2021) provides a common framework for improving the performance of the European education system, promoting the use of new technologies in the educational process and developing the digital skills of students and teachers. It is desirable that Romania, in the education reform process, pursue two European strategic priorities related to digital education, namely *the development of a strong digital educational ecosystem and the improvement of digital skills and competences for digital transformation.*

The EU Digital Education Action Plan 2021-2027(U.E., 2021) is based on the plan for the previous period and sets out the European Commission's vision for high-quality, inclusive and accessible digital education in Europe. It is a call to action for closer cooperation at European level, to draw conclusions from the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic during which technology has been used at an unprecedented level in the field of education and training, a call to adapt education and training systems in the digital age.

The European space of education

At the level of the European Union, the right to a quality and comprehensive education, vocational training and lifelong learning is the first principle of the European Pillar of Social Rights. The European Union's intensive economic recovery efforts have made education a central part of its strategic development plan. The European Education Area proposes cooperation at the level of the European Union to harmonize and support the development of the education systems of the member states. The six directions of cooperation targeted in the European Education Area offer Romania the opportunity to improve the performance of its education system by addressing some persistent system problems that have not received adequate answers in the last three decades, namely:
- the quality of education;
- equity and gender equality;
- green transitions and digital transitions;
- teachers and trainers;
- higher education;
- geopolitical aspects of education.

In order to reduce the gap between Romania and other member states, national efforts to improve and modernize education must be synchronized with European priorities. The history of the last three years has shown us that, instead of planning based on the predictability of the evolution environment, we must consider planning in an environment

characterized by unpredictability and design flexible systems, characterized by a good capacity for resilience and response in situations of crisis. Thus, the EC's new action plan on education(U.E.,2020) defines the measures by which member states can be helped to face the challenges and take advantage of the opportunities offered by education in the digital age and is based on - as I have already shown - two strategic priorities:

- encouraging the development of a high-performance digital education ecosystem,
- the development of digital skills and competences relevant to digital transformation.

Encouraging the development of a high-performance digital education ecosystem aims at the effective planning and development of digital capabilities (infrastructure, equipment, connectivity), motivated and competent human resources (teachers) in the digital field; structuring high-quality educational content is another essential component that requires accessible tools and secure platforms that align with privacy and ethical standards. A good infrastructure, hardware and software, is not enough when the issue of digitization in education is raised, but the entire didactic process must be rethought; the teaching-learning process must be restructured in such a way as to stimulate students' creativity, form their critical thinking, enhance and value individual study so that students develop their competences and support skills for adapting to an unpredictable environment, in continuous evolution, to a dynamic and digitized economy.

The development of digital skills and competences relevant to digital transformation envisages training of basic digital skills and competences from an early age, digital skills - including combating disinformation, IT training, a good knowledge and understanding of technologies that require an intensive use of data- such as artificial intelligence, as well as the development of advanced digital skills that can foster the growth of digital specialists and guarantee a balanced representation of girls and young women in studies and professions in the digital sector.

In this context, updating the European Digital Skills Framework becomes essential.

In order to be able to implement these strategies, unitarily, at the level of the member states, the strengthening of cooperation and the exchange of information in the field of digital education at the level of the European Union can play a more active role in terms of: identifying, sharing and consolidating good practices supporting Member States and the education and training sector through tools, frameworks, guidelines, technical expertise and research.

4. The need for a resilient education system, the lesson learned during the pandemic crisis

At the moment, over the echo of the pandemic crisis, the energy crisis and the threat of an imminent economic crisis overlap. In this context, government officials and school institutions are facing a real challenge: planning the educational process in a period characterized by uncertainty. To the already lost learning time, which has seriously impacted the direct and indirect beneficiaries of education services, other unknowns are now added, increasing the anxiety of teachers, children and families, making planning and decision-making difficult. At least in the last two years, the most used term - in different environments - is RESILIENCE, as a reference to the response of individuals, organizations to face potential dangers that could hinder their ability to adapt and respond in crisis situations(Dumitrașcu,2020). The term resilience, originating from the sphere of psychology and psychiatry(Johnson & Wiechelt, 2004), has also established itself in fields such as social and economic sciences. A resilient system, as a structural part of a resilient society, can face and react to shocks or profound structural changes, adopting one of two attitudes: shock resistance or adaptation (Manca, Benczur, Giovannini, 2017). If the shock is not of extremely high intensity nor of duration, the system can absorb it, based on its own resistance capacity that will help it to overcome the crisis situation, with as few losses as possible (Giovannini,

Benczur, Campolongo, Cariboni and Manca, 2020). The second attitude, adaptation, assumes a certain level of flexibility, which will lead to changes in the system (Manca et al., 2017).

By adopting a resilient behavior, the system will improve its capabilities and have the power to respond to potential challenges, adapting to new conditions in the long term. The shock generated by a crisis situation must be seen - in the end - as an opportunity, a lesson about what and how to act in the future, in other crisis situations (Manca et al., 2017). Increasing the resilience of the education system, in the context of designing sustainable educational policies, can only be achieved on the basis of solid decision principles, so that all students are guaranteed access to an inclusive and quality education. In order to develop resilient education systems, strategies in the field must take into account several essential elements (UNICEF Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia, 2020), namely:

Social exclusion - as the period of the pandemic crisis has just proven, in such situations the factors of social exclusion become acute: incomes decrease, the unemployment rate increases, the state of health among the population becomes precarious. All these have a direct impact on the educational environment (absenteeism among students is increasing, a higher level is recorded in terms of the school dropout rate) and on the local community, spreading to the government level. We can talk about a quality education only by considering the exclusion factors of priority importance, on all four segments involved: the student and his family, the school, the local community and the government level.

Planning and communication in a context marked by uncertainty - it is very true that school organizations cannot control political decisions but they can focus on what they know, can control and have the competence to do; more precisely, they must focus on the provision of quality educational services, on inclusive education and - last but not least - on the well-being of specialists in the system. When discussing the restructuring of the education system, with the objective of a better quality education, there must be a vision shared by the whole society, considering the impact of the results of the education system on society. At this point, it becomes essential to involve stakeholders at all levels, in all stages of the planning process, to ensure the availability of real, active support from them, especially in contexts of uncertainty. A transparent communication, in contexts marked by uncertainty, ensures a good and correct understanding of the strategies and future plans of the school organization, on the part of all actors involved, facilitates the exchange of information at the local level, so that the community can mobilize its resources in concrete directions , effectively and efficiently.

Crisis situations create opportunities for development - with all the disruptions that the pandemic situation has caused in education, it should be noted that it also offered opportunities; thus, new ways of teaching and learning, new approaches in communication with students and their families, new roles were experimented to facilitate the increase in the level of well-being of the learners. The indisputable gain are experiences passed through, transformed into lessons learned and which must, for the future, be taken into account in the processes of planning and reform in education. This is an opportunity not to be missed, which requires a planning process designed to continuously assess the situation, which intends to address inequalities, which encourages recording and documentation of intervention processes and outcomes, and which monitors and evaluates practices to improve their effectiveness and support successful actions.

Conclusions

The article highlights the main elements from which one must start in the restructuring of the education system, with the objective of building a system with much better resilience and which will offer the beneficiaries a higher quality education, regardless of the challenges of future times. School organizations provide services whose quality influences the development of the communities they belong to, thus resulting in an imperative need to ensure

the quality of education. Change in school organizations is a complex process involving organizational members, education beneficiaries and the community. The quality of education from the perspective of change in the field of education has a major role: it determines the progress of contemporary society and favors the adaptation of the system in a context of uncertainty. The quality of education, from the perspective of change, is materialized in the quality of educational services, in the creation of trust and the adoption of those measures aimed at the optimal achievement of the proposed objectives, regardless of the attributes of the context at a given moment. At the moment, still strongly feeling the effects of the pandemic crisis, going through an unprecedented energy crisis and preparing for the impact of a global economic crisis, uncertainty is the attribute of the present and future times. Education, as a system, will have to be prepared to adapt in real time and this will only be possible if we discuss a flexible system, characterized by a good capacity for resilience. Change, rapid and profound, will be the main future coordinate of education.

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