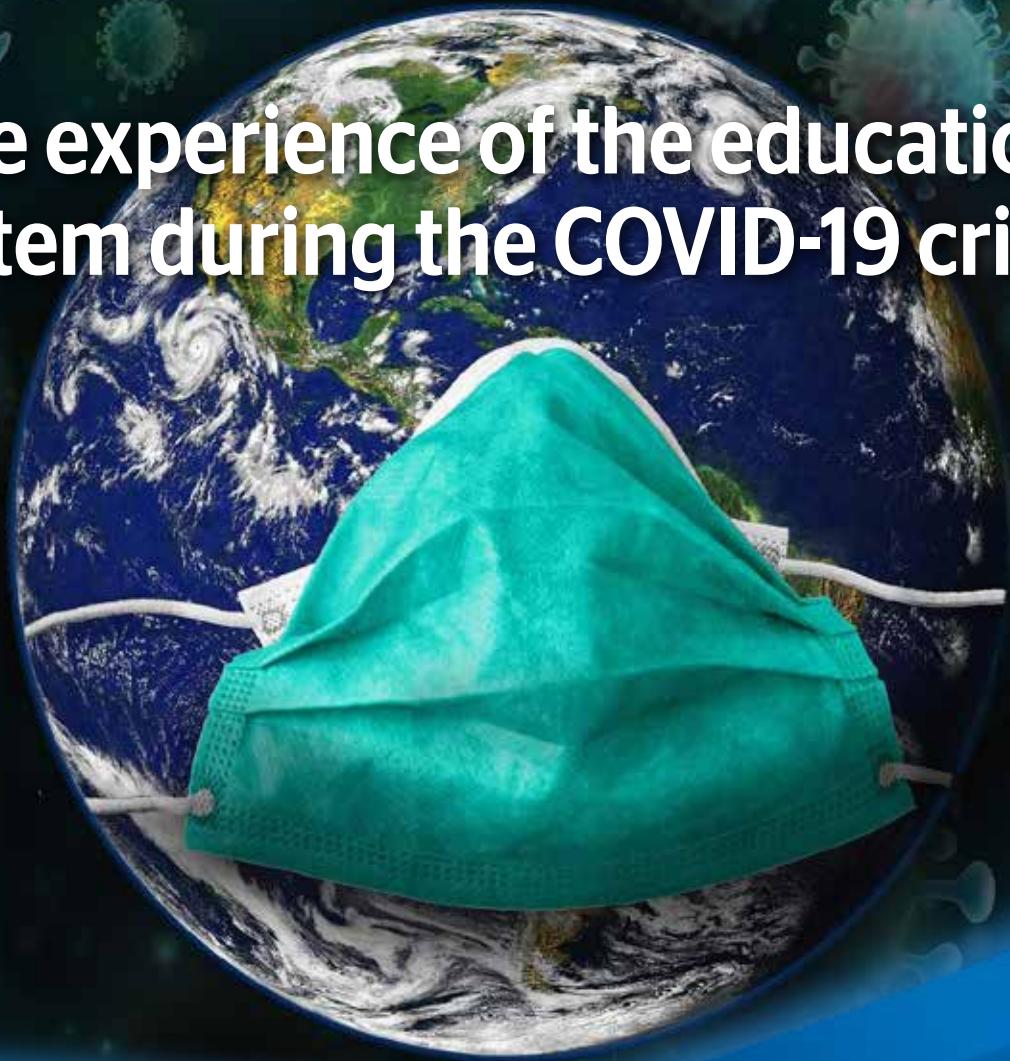


The experience of the education system during the COVID-19 crisis



United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization



Romanian
National Commission
for UNESCO



Organizația Națiunilor
Unite pentru Educație,
Știință și Cultură

Comisia Națională
a României
pentru UNESCO

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The experience of the education system during the COVID-19 crisis

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Daniela Zaharia

**Secretary-General
National Commission of Romania
for UNESCO**

„The COVID-19 pandemic surprised Romania to the same extent that it surprised the whole world. As soon as the nature of the disease began to be understood, and the measures and sacrifices that society had to make to survive this challenge became clearer, a huge dilemma was added to the concerns of the health crisis: the crisis of education. The fight against the disease has begun to affect the future in an unexpected way, by limiting access to school education for children and young people. In the face of this problem, no society has proved to be fully prepared since the first moments of quarantine, and the solutions have been varied, with different degrees of success from one country to another. For Romania, the effort to keep children connected to the education system meant overcoming an important series of difficulties: the unequal access to distance communication technology that both schools and teachers, as well as their students and families felt; the ability of teachers to adapt to the methodology of online learning, different from that of interaction with students in the classroom; the stress borne by parents, engaged in a new and very demanding way in the education process; the accumulated psychological effect that social distancing had on children and young people. Distance learning did not start during the quarantine period in a totally unprepared way, because some online resources, as well as a certain level of experience, especially in the university system, already existed. However, it was not easy for the education system to extend these experiences from a niche level to a general status. We set out to bring together in this publication three categories of perspectives on the first reaction of the education system to the COVID-19 crisis: the institutional one, represented by the measures adopted and the resources mobilized by the Ministry of Education and its partners; the perspective of the main actors of the system, those directly involved as students, teachers and parents; the opinions of specialists in the sciences of education, who are still at the beginning of the sedimentation and analysis of the information accumulated in this context.”

THE REACTION OF THE INSTITUTIONS

Romania's early response to COVID in the Education sector

In times of crisis, a prompt response to the problems generated by it is vital. COVID-19 refreshed the responsiveness of states and led to a mobilization of resources commensurate with the various contexts present. In March and April 2020, Romania successfully tried to identify equitable solutions for children's access to education and to ensure their return to schools, depending on the evolution of the pandemic. A series of efforts and initiatives of the central administration in conjunction with those of the private sector and non-governmental organizations have led to a complex initial response, which combated in a first phase early school leaving and promoted learning as a continuous process that must function in any conditions.

Society has understood how important it is to invest in distance learning, which not only mitigates the immediate disruption caused by COVID-19, but also outlines ways of working to develop more open and flexible education systems for the future.

The measures implemented by Romania also considered the protection of children and young people most at risk, as school closures disproportionately hurt vulnerable and disadvantaged students, who rely on schools for a range of social services - health, nutrition, protection and emotional support.

Romania is one of the first states that at the beginning of March ordered the measure of centralized closure of schools, at national level, and the implementation of alternative educational solutions, from a distance. The early initiatives of the Ministry of Education and Research and its partners, in March and April, were diversified to meet the needs of as many affected categories of public as possible.

Schools across the country have been invited to access the suite of educational applications offered under free license by Google and Microsoft. Through this software, it was possible to organize online courses, manage materials as support for courses, the subjects could be noted in the virtual catalog, and parents were informed through automatic reports about the evolution of students in the classroom. In this approach, the teachers were supported by the Teacher Training Centres at county level and by e-learning experts. Webinars such as the “School on the Net” series were dedicated to teachers, school principals and school inspectors for sharing best practices on distance learning. Several online platforms have centralized different types of free digital resources and useful information to support teachers in using new technologies in learning activities with students. Other dedicated platforms hosted the digital version of all textbooks, as well as preparation tests for students who took national exams this year.

The Teleșcoala program, in partnership with the Romanian Television TVR, offered courses to the 8th and 12th/13th grade students, in order to prepare them for the national exams. The show “Teleșcoala” was broadcast from Monday to Friday, on national television stations, but also online on TVR's YouTube channel, on the show's Facebook page and on television sites.

A digital classroom module called Naradix was launched in April by the Narada organization, offering courses to students and teachers on topics of interest, supported by business people, celebrities, trainers known in the fields of social media, personal branding, personal development, technology, artificial intelligence, financial education. Another organization, Speakings, has launched an integrated public speaking program for pupils and students, designed to develop their public communication, organization and structuring of information skills.

The first line of free psychological counseling on COVID-19 for teachers, parents and students was also created - "Ambassador for the Community". On a weekly basis, psychologists spoke to teachers, students and parents about the solutions that can be adopted to overcome the crisis generated by the pandemic. In this context, psychological counseling was provided free of charge, as well as legal and social assistance to teachers, students and parents. Two telephone lines were available, where interested parties could call, as well as an e-mail address and a Facebook group.

The Ministry of Education and Research's #ICare #SchoolAtHome campaign aimed to transmit to students, pupils and parents the encouragement to protect themselves from infection with the new coronavirus, avoiding crowded spaces as much as possible. At the same time, it was important for students to be aware that the learning process continues with home school through alternative solutions.

The University of Agronomic Sciences and Veterinary Medicine in Bucharest (USAMV), through the USAMV Foundation, joined the initiative of the Ministry of Education and Research, within the campaign #ICare #SchoolAtHome, with a project through which

tablets connected to the internet were donated to high school students located in disadvantaged communities, with a subscription included and supported by USAMV for 24 months.

At the beginning of the pandemic, the Ministry of Education and Research allocated 25 million lei to finance research projects on limiting the spread and combating the epidemic with the new coronavirus. The research topics focused, among others, on the development of new technologies, drugs and vaccines, SARS-COV-2 genome sequencing and phylogenetic analysis of circulating strains in Romania, advanced epidemic management techniques in the community, development of innovative solutions for decontamination (UV, microwave, X-ray, biochemical, nanoparticles, etc.), development of prototypes of ventilators with parameters adapted to assist infected patients, development of molecular tools for assessing the emergence and re-emergence of COVID-19.

Romania is therefore open to expanding its best distance learning practices, open educational resources and research projects to other states and international organizations, having the conviction that only together we are stronger and able to overcome more effectively the challenges to which the environment subjects us. Looking ahead, investing in sustainable development, on a global scale, is the only solution to keep our sense of cultural and social progress unchanged.

Iris Constantin
Expert

National Commission of Romania for UNESCO

The SMART-Edu project

SMART - Edu. Strategy on the digitalization of education in Romania 2021-2027.
<https://www.smart.edu.ro/home>

The COVID-19 crisis highlighted the need to speed up the integration of information technologies in the learning process. The relationship between learning and emerging technology will produce a profound reform, perhaps even a revolution, of the education system.

The SMART-Edu strategy was launched in a public consultation by the Ministry of Education in November to allow for a broad debate on the future of digital education.

SMART-Edu priorities:

- **Accessibility** - providing digital infrastructure

and emerging technologies for access to inclusive and quality education;

- **Connectivity** - developing digital skills for the digital transition to a competitive society, focused on sustainable development, social equity and resilience; digital literacy and combating misinformation; use of open educational resources;
- **Community** - stakeholder consultation and involvement;
- **Digital educational ecosystem** - creating a high performance digital educational environment respecting digital ethics, personal data protection, cyber security, data analysis, etc.;
- **Innovation** - use of all digital / emerging resources and technologies, stimulating creativity and entrepreneurship;
- **Sustainability** - ensuring medium and long-term predictability, through inter-sectoral cooperation, for quality education and a green and digital economy.



Directions for SMART-Edu:

- Development of digital skills at all levels of cross-curricular education, through specialized disciplines, through formal and non-formal activities;
- Supporting initial and continuous digital training of teachers;
- Improving the digital infrastructure to reduce connectivity gaps (internet connection, creation of internal networks, equipment, technical support);
- Stimulating learning units and institutions to develop educational offers with digital specializations and qualifications appropriate to the professions of the future;
- Development of digital educational tools, en-

- encouraging innovation to adapt creative, interactive, student-centered educational solutions;
- Creating attractive Open Educational Resources;
- Development and multiplication of public-private partnerships through participation in digital networks, including with European and international bodies;
- Exchange of good practices on local educational platforms, national e-learning, respectively on international platforms (SELFIE, e-Twinning, etc);
- Encouraging and promoting initiatives on online security, data protection, cyber hygiene, IT ethics;
- Development of the strategic forecasting framework for the green economy and adaptation to the jobs of the future.



„The digitalization of education is a priority project for me as a politician, but also a bold commitment for future generations, which all ministers of education must assume in the coming years, regardless of political color. We are all here because we cannot wait another minute to start digitizing and modernizing Romanian education. Because we are talking about a project of such magnitude and in order to achieve what we set out to do, we need all the actors in society, all the available resources.”

Monica Cristina Anisie
Minister of Education and Research

Romanian schools during the lockdown

Beyond figures, institutional and scientific analysis, beyond public policies and crisis actions, we wondered what is the human, emotional, cultural and social reaction of those for whom the pandemic has suddenly changed the contact with education. What can be the impact of such a period on young minds, on how children and adolescents perceive themselves in an atmosphere in which everyday certainties are suddenly relativized. We wanted, therefore, to give a space of expression to students and teachers from the ASPnet school network. Seven schools and high schools of different profiles answered the call, coming from various areas of Romania. From Ploiești, an industrial city located north of the capital, the testimonies belong to the “Toma Socolescu” Technical High-School, an institution with tradition in technological education, where young people study for occupations adapted to the regional economic profile. Two theoretical high schools in Bucharest, the “George Coșbuc” National Bilingual College, with a history of over 140 years, a school in which English culture is cultivated in particular, and the “Octav Onicescu” National College, strongly oriented towards the study of mathematics and computer science, also responded to the appeal with testimonies from students and teachers. Primary and secondary education is represented by three schools. Two of these, the old “C.D. Aricescu” from the small town of Câmpulung and the Secondary School No. 3 from Voluntari, both with a century-old history, faced similar problems during the quarantine period: the difficulty of working with young students, the re-

lationship with sometimes disadvantaged social environments and limited access to technical means, the teachers’ efforts to adapt as quickly as possible to the situation and discover the most suitable solutions for their students. At “St. Nicholas” Special School in Bucharest, whose activity is dedicated to students with learning difficulties, the efforts were even greater, the vulnerability was felt more acutely, the need for innovation was more pronounced, but the reward was even more satisfactory, as we understand from the teachers’ testimony. The long-term effects of the pandemic on the education of these young people, as well as on the working methods in education, remain to be studied and decanted. It is important to listen to their first reactions, to understand the cultural and psychological mechanisms that provoke them and to make these voices one of the main sources of public policies to come for the future of education.

**“Toma Socolescu”
Technological High-School in Ploiești**



“I am a 10th grade student and I have a normal life as a teenager. I go to school every day, even if I come from a village that is close to the city of Ploiești. Since March 15, however, my student life has changed. We are no longer allowed to leave homes for no reason, and the government has asked us all to have statements that indicate the reason for

any trip we take. For this reason, my family stays at home, which at first was a wonderful experience, but soon we started to get bored, and my mother asks me to clean and take care of a lot of things in the house or garden. As a student, life became even stranger. All teachers take online lessons. They are in the Google classroom every day, for each subject, and the teachers see us on Zoom, especially in mathematics and foreign languages. It's a kind of SciFi school! It's great, I can sit on my laptop all day, and my mother understood and reduced the demands for household chores. But I miss school, meetings with colleagues, even the bad ones. What I mean is that I would like to go to school. I can't believe I said that! I miss everything, trips, colleagues, teachers..."

Mihaela Andrei Atina, student



"I am a student in the 11th grade. A program called UNESCO Model was introduced at my school, which excites me because I have learned so much about various civilizations. Finally, many of the things studied in school, such as geography or history, began to mean something. The Corona virus has condemned us all to stay at home since March 15. So I live with my parents in an old communist apartment in a crowded city. For my education I have to spend many hours online, with teachers coming and going, I have to do homework, access Zoom, Google

Meets and a lot of other platforms, many quite nice. I also discovered that although I can use my phone, I had to search and learn a lot of new applications.

My greatest joy is that now I can learn as much as I want about history and geography and about the UNESCO program that aroused my interest in these topics. There is a whole universe of applications, of virtual museums, I am delighted! Of course, this is only a stage, I intend to return to school as soon as possible, I miss my friends, the parks, the school".

Laurențiu Ionuț Radu, student



"My name is Larisa Maria Sabrina Cazacu! I can say that the Corona virus turned my life upside down, as a teenager and a student! I am usually very active; I am the student representative and we are about 1500 students in our school. I was very involved, I had a lot of volunteer activities and I did a lot of things with the other high school students. But March 15 sent us all home.

Now my day is divided between housework, cooking with my mother, thinking of my father who works as a driver and travels all over Europe, taking care of schoolwork which is now online. I think we do more practical activities now than when we went to school. We can see experiments on YouTube and then the teachers explain all the elements that were used.

I hope to get back to school soon, I miss every-

thing, colleagues, teachers, friends I haven't seen in a month!"

Larisa Maria Sabrina Cazacu, student



"In these days when time seems to have stopped, when being away from everything familiar and dear becomes painful with each passing day, we are "lucky" to have the internet that keeps us in touch with old and new friends.

We thank God for all our adventures and look forward to the next ones, together, because only together we will win!"

Silvia Gunia, teacher



"I am a teacher of Romanian language and literature and in these difficult moments I am lucky to be with my family. I miss my colleagues, drinking coffee with them in the morning. I miss the students the most, who make me smile and make me feel valuable. I learned a lot from them in

the 15 years of teaching at the department, and now that education is done online I am constantly amazed

by their digital skills. Everything will be fine and we will meet healthy and that gives me strength."

Marian Dragomir, teacher



"None of us suspected a few months ago that our lives would change so much. Now we have time. Now words are more precious because they express feelings and replace gestures. But...We have no doubt about the pandemic or distancing. We are good

friends in these difficult times. And we will stay home. Thank you for being a part of our lives and I urge you to be healthy so that we can see each other again with our eyes full of the emotion of reunion. Good health to all!"

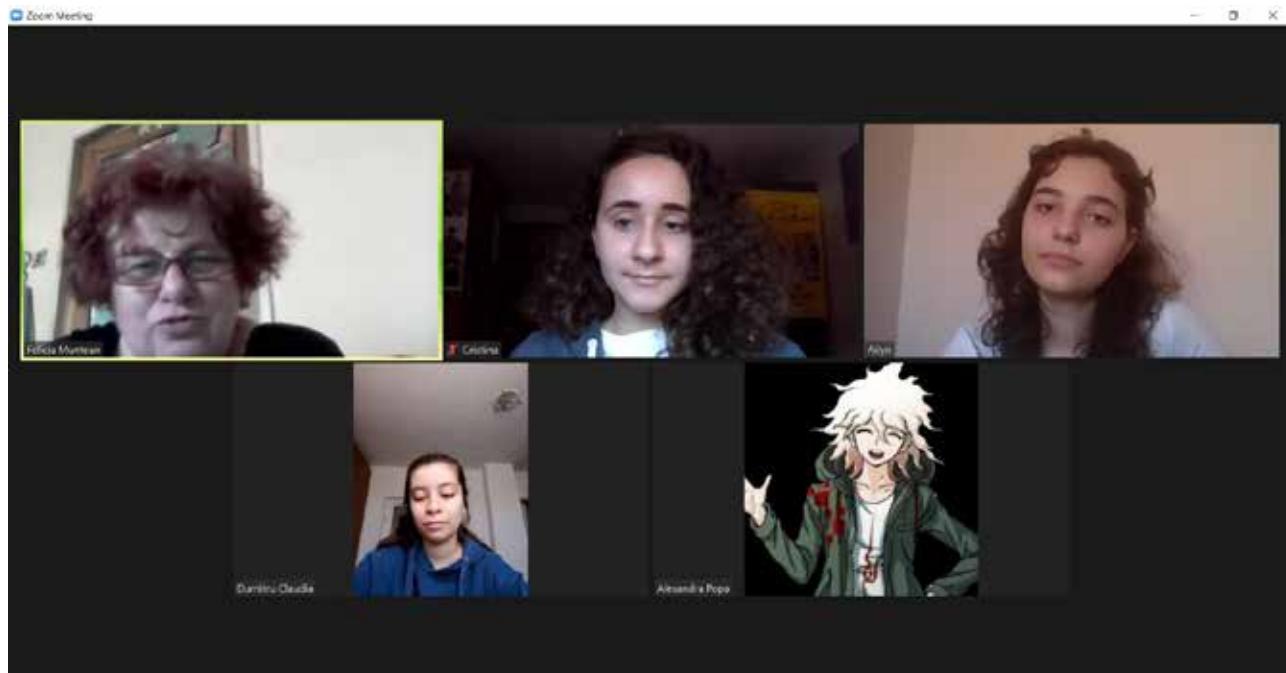
Rodica Avramescu, teacher

**"George Coșbuc"
National Bilingual College in Bucharest**

"At the «George Coșbuc» National College in Bucharest, a reading club, called «In the Mirror», has been operating since the second semester of the 2019-2020 school year. But what do we do in a pandemic? Do we give up the club and interesting activities? No, we continue on Zoom..."

Before the pandemic, as a strange coincidence, within the club was intensely, dramatically and

TESTIMONIALS: STUDENTS AND TEACHERS



deeply debated Orwell's «1984». Then, during the isolation, everyone kept a reading diary. The meetings moved to Zoom, the usual meetings were held, and the presentations were accompanied by music. I had more time to read, and the existence of the club stimulates the need to explore for students, who proposed very good books for debate.

We also have a group of small children, the 5th graders, who are coordinated by the adults, and as support we have our own library, consisting of books donated by parents and students.

Supporting the love of reading in this difficult time is very important, and «In the Mirror» is for me and the students an agora, a space of joy and our need

for reading, knowledge and dialogue, using the generous auditory and visual tools online. We want to build a tradition in our college of the courage to approach, discuss and promote the book, ideas, beauty, solidarity and openness to creators everywhere.”

Felicia Muntean, teacher

«In the Mirror» book club is a space where we, those who are passionate about reading, can find a refuge in which to express ourselves freely. The fact that we managed to keep in touch in the online environment makes me very happy. Because the club

TESTIMONIALS: STUDENTS AND TEACHERS

is a place where we feel comfortable and pleasant, I think a lot of the worries of this period have passed.”

Cristina Mantu, student

“I’ve always liked Friday because we have a reading club on Friday. It is a real pleasure to sit together with my colleagues, to “mirror”, face to face, debating various and interesting topics, to discover new authors, fascinating books. I met enthusiastic, happy people who consider reading a good book a great pleasure. I’m glad I was able to continue online.”

Aylin Chirculescu, student

“So even in difficult times, reading brings a drop of joy in our lives and, especially, of the students. Life must go on beautifully, no matter the situation. We wish you the most pleasant readings and, if you need a recommendation, our club in Coșbuc is waiting for you!”

Carmen Dumitrescu, teacher

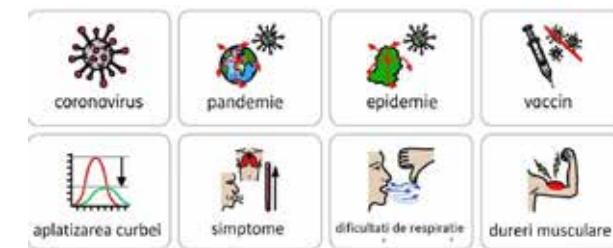
▶ “St. Nicholas” Special Secondary School in Bucharest

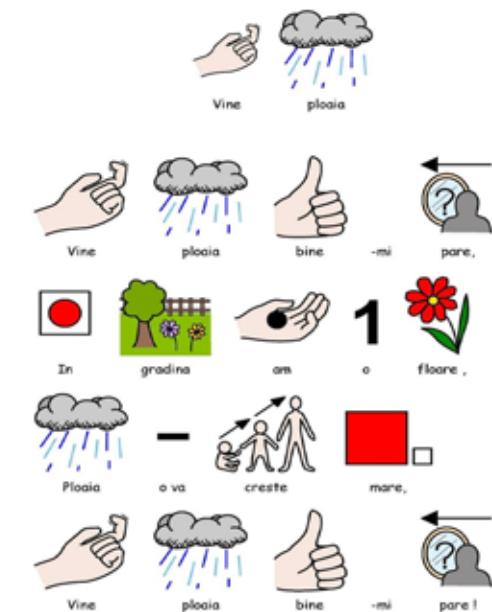


“We all know that the learning process occurs when students experience or interact in multisensory environments. The goal of teachers, but also of parents, must be to create meaningful activities for children

from which to learn.

We will undoubtedly ask ourselves how this can be achieved in the current context we are going through. With your will, we want to share our experience in online education.





The emphasis is on computer-based learning, but we have continued to use worksheets so that students do not become accustomed to sitting at the desk or forgetting how traditional learning tools are used: pencil, colors, communication book. However, it was necessary to adapt the teaching material, to simplify the tasks in the worksheets so that the students could do the exercises at home. For students with severe disabilities, the emphasis has been on augmentative and alternative communication. In the case of students with mild and moderate deficiencies, the special psychopedagogy teacher created in collaboration with the teacher-educator in the class interdisciplinary worksheets.

Although the use of ICT means supports the development of critical thinking, creativity and at the same time develops a critical and reflective attitude towards the available information, children say that they prefer direct communication. In class, students communicate nonverbally with each other and take the courage to ask if they did not understand, but online a student thinks that only he did not understand and is reluctant to ask. There are always shy students, and the lack of socialization in the traditional class is a big disadvantage for them.

In this period of online education, which is still going on right now, students and teachers had the opportunity to learn new things, to discover new applications, and those who so far have not worked on the Internet or computer had the opportunity to get acquainted with modern teaching-learning means."

Ioana Raluca Vlad, teacher



**“Octav Onicescu”
National College in Bucharest**

“It was very difficult for us to adapt to such a difficult period, both mentally and physically, to disconnect from everything that means socializing, teamwork and to spend our days non-stop in front of the computer. Who knew that such a difficult time could come into our lives? But, for better or worse, we slowly, slowly adapted, we learned to protect ourselves as much as we could and to take care not only of ourselves but also of those around us. However, after the waters calmed down, I returned to the usual edu-

cation with a high school attendance, unfortunately alternating a week in high school and then a week at home, online, and so on and so forth...Even though I returned to high school, it doesn't seem to be the same at all: different teaching, sad faces of children waiting to go out in the high school yard to socialize, but with strict rules, waiting with all their heart and fear whether the closure will be announced or not.

We cannot say that we have managed to overcome this period and I am afraid that we will not return to what was before the pandemic. All we can do is persevere and be strong!”

Rebeca Mina and Alexandra Zahariuc, students



“Distance learning was the main way to keep in touch with our students during the national quarantine. The school has generated online classes on various internet tools. This mobilized all teachers, parents and of course our students.

Unfortunately, many factors played a role in the unequal success of students: economic, social, cultural circumstances. Although it seems that we live in a digitalized world, the power to continue education at home

in conditions such as those caused by the COVID-19 pandemic involves more effort than we expected. It was difficult for me not to teach a foreign language, such as French, because it is a well-documented and resourceful language on the internet, but the hardest part was teaching online at different levels of students who do not have the same knowledge about French. I had to design different levels of lessons, more than in the case of classical learning, with more differentiated tasks and dedicate more time to be sure of the effectiveness of the dialogue with my students. In the end, I think it was a difficult, challenging but interesting period for me, but I’m afraid that not all my students perceived it the same way and, especially, I’m afraid that not everyone had equal study conditions.”

Roxana Zanea, teacher



▶ **“C. D. Aricescu” Secondary School in Câmpulung, Argeş county**

“During these months of isolation, teachers had to adapt to online teaching in order to continue school education. We had to deal with an unknown situation, in which we have not been before. Not only teachers have been put in a position to adapt. Students also practiced how to learn online.

Using a learning platform was a challenge for us and allowed students to study in a virtual classroom. But the biggest problem was that many students and even some teachers did not have the technology and devices to participate in online lessons. And, even if they had them, they needed guidance to know how to use digital technology.

We were not prepared for such a situation and we compensated by participating in online training courses in order to learn the working methods as quickly as possible. In our opinion, online teaching is useful, but face-to-face teaching is the most effective”.

*Mihaela Cristina Nicolăescu, teacher
Ionica-Ramona Neacşu, teacher*

▶ **Secondary School nr. 3 in Voluntari, Ilfov county**

“March 2020 started online teaching in Romania. Unfortunately, it found us largely unprepared, at least some of us, and when I say this I mean not only Romanian teachers, I also mean Romanian students.

The difference between students and teachers is that students have adapted easily, are digital natives, are the new wave of people born in thriving technology, while teachers are digital immigrants and represent the transition generation, who knows and uses new technologies, but can remember a time when the virtual only existed in the dark basements called Internet Cafes.

This pandemic has forced teachers to become digital “natives”, to adapt, to discover and use new technologies and platforms, to collaborate with their students, to look for the best solutions in order for the teaching act to end with the achievement of the

proposed objectives.

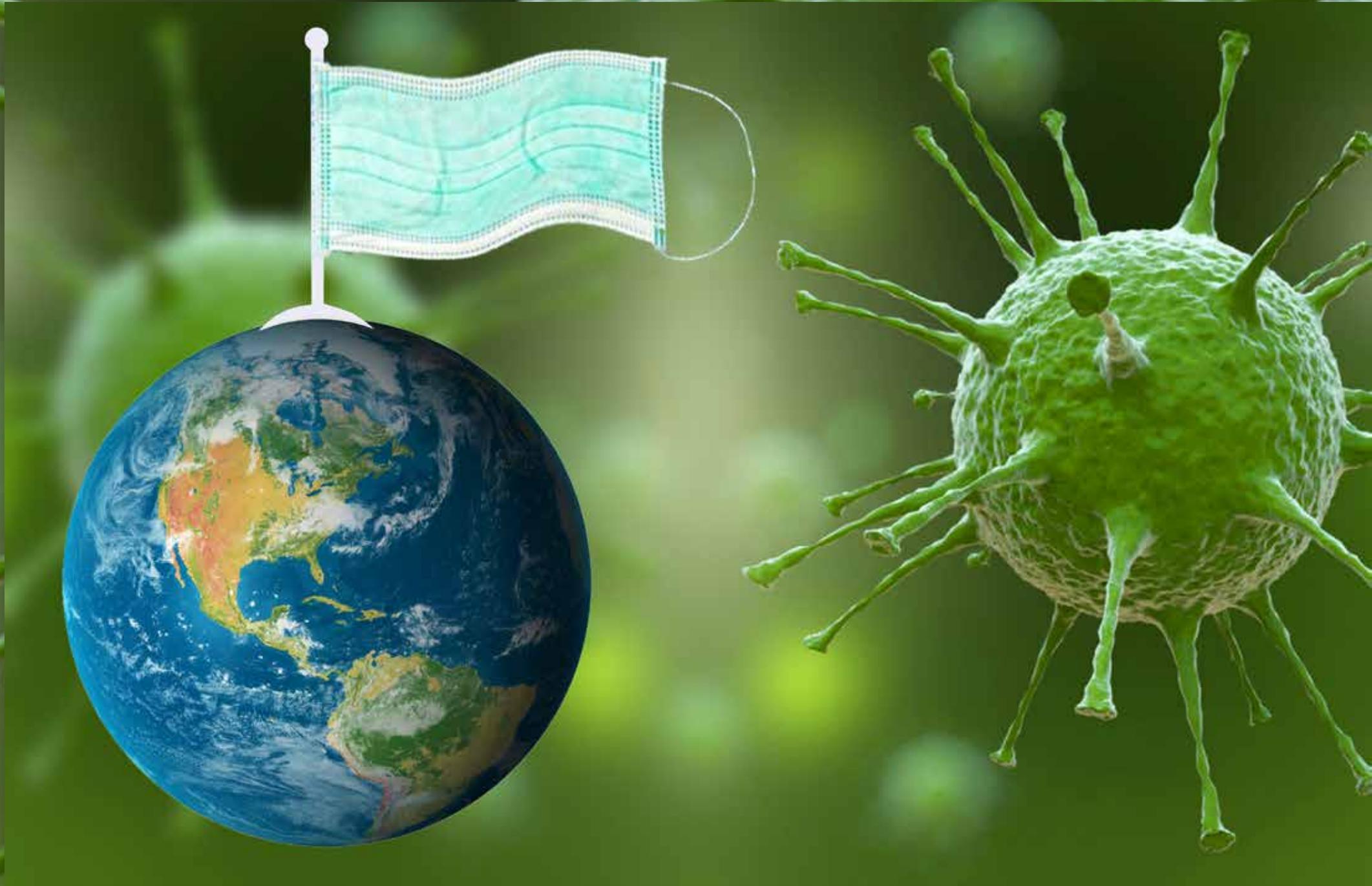
The pandemic forced us to change not only our teaching style, but also our evaluation style. I tested so many apps and platforms that at one point I had to stop and look for the “THAT” platform that suits my students, and if at first I thought ZOOM was the best video conferencing app, I found that we could successfully use Microsoft Teams also.

The applications I use include: Mentimeter, Wordwall, Padlet, Livresq, Jamboard, Openboard, Google Forms, Liveworksheets. During a lesson, however, I do not use more than 2 or 3 applications, I try not to tire the students with too much information about how to connect or use them.

Howard Gardner theorized the existence of eight distinct intelligences, even suggesting the presence of the ninth, the so-called existential intelligence. I believe that another one has emerged since March 2020, namely digital intelligence.”

Simona Popescu, teacher





Analysis of the reaction of the education system to the complete online transition

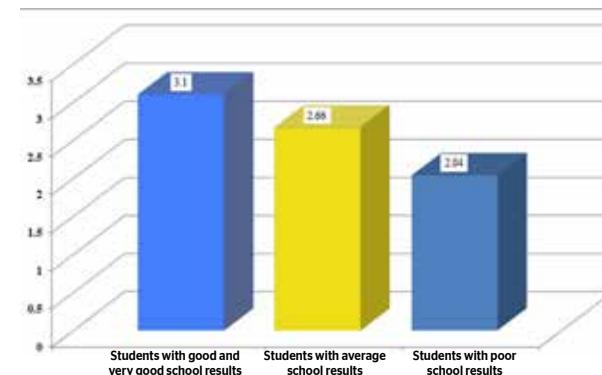
March-April 2020

An analysis conducted by specialists in educational sciences from the University of Bucharest, “Babeş-Bolyai” University in Cluj, “Al.I. Cuza” University in Iași, West University of Timișoara and the Institute of Educational Sciences within the Ministry of Education.

Excerpt from “Online School. Elements for Educational Innovation” Evaluative research report, Bucharest, May 2020, University of Bucharest Publishing House https://unibuc.ro/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Scoala_Online_Raport_aprilie_2020.pdf



Limitations for certain teaching activities (N = 6436)		
	Frequencies	Percentages
Personalized support for students with special needs	4104	63.8 %
Real communication (human contact)	4202	65.3 %
Monitoring the rhythms of learning	3325	51.7 %
Feedback for immediate correction or for validation of new acquisitions	2914	45.3 %
Explanation of concepts, relationships, phenomena	2905	45.1 %
Personal guidance	2338	36.3 %
Other...	208	3.2 %

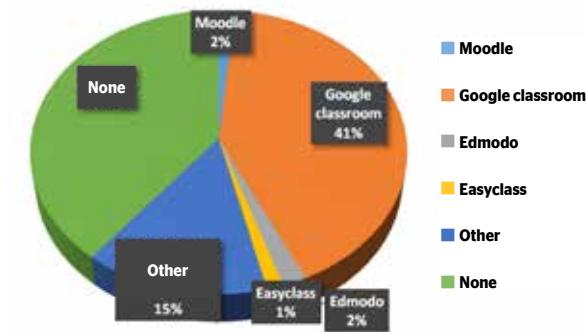


Students' progress, by level groups (Averages on scale 1-4. N = 6436)

The main research concerning the effects that the online transition had in the first period of the restrictions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic was published in May 2020. The study conducted by the ten team research members involved 6,436 pre-university teachers (from the total number of 208,263 teachers registered at the beginning of the school year 2019-2020), randomly selected, with all levels

Difficulties in carrying out remote activities - differentiation by residence environment (Average on scale 1-4. N = 6436)					
	Rural (N = 2001)	Small urban (N = 1775)	Large urban (N = 2660)	F	Significant comparisons*
Technical difficulties (e.g. platforms to be installed, not working)	2.56	2.45	2.39	15,845**	R > Um R > UM
Limited Internet access	2.14	1.88	1.75	83,879**	R > Um > UM
Lack of a sufficiently efficient computer	2.38	2.21	2.11	30,879**	R > Um > UM

* Results from the application of the t Bonferroni test
** p < .01



Online platforms used for class management (N=6436)

of study and from three different environments, representative for Romania: rural areas, small towns and large cities. The analysis of the results highlighted some relevant conclusions regarding the capacity of the system to adapt to online education, the efficiency of the main resources used and the effect that the distance learning period had on students.

The main conclusions are:

- The success of the online transfer depended on a variety of factors, among which predominantly were: teachers' prior training for the use of e-technologies, schools' ability to provide technical and didactic assistance to teachers and students, and teachers' ability to take on learning counseling tasks, in addition to the usual didactic role.
- Online learning has affected a number of important aspects: the quality of the learning relationship, the cooperative dimension, the monitoring and objective evaluation of students' progress.
- The online system caused, in the first months of the pandemic, a series of inequalities and

disparities between students: the increase of educational costs in terms of personal technical equipment affected children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds; students with learning difficulties progressed harder than those with good results in the classical system; some disciplines, especially the vocational ones, have been disadvantaged in the online system.

- Online courses have focused on key aspects of learning, but made a smaller contribution to shaping personality, behaviors and social values.

The authors of the study: Petre Botnariuc, Constantin Cucos, Cătălin Glava, Daniel E. Iancu, Marian D. Ilie, Olimpiu Istrate, Adrian Vicențiu Labăr, Ion-Ovidiu Pânișoară, Doru Ștefănescu, Simona Velea



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University of Bucharest

The changes brought in education by the COVID-19 pandemic

The current global crisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic has affected all areas of activity. Starting with the way goods are produced to the manner we spend our free time, from the way we get involved in the public life to the way we build our plans for the future, all aspects of our daily lives have changed significantly. The education system could not escape unmarked from this year's developments, and the consequences can be significant in the medium and long run.

It is true, over time, changes in education have often been accompanied by intense debates. When the nib appeared, the followers of the slate tablet and the lead pencil (Caragiale's pencil) claimed that the students would not know how to write anymore, and that, anyway, it was an unnecessary expense. The same argument was raised concerning the fountainpen, the ballpoint pen and, more recently, the computer and the smartphone. But the world went on. Of course, the current discussion about the education systems and the educational response in the context of the pandemic is much more serious than that about a working tool, no matter how significant or important it may be. After all, what is being questioned is how the largest societal subsystem can function - in most of the democratic countries, the number of those employed in the field of education is higher than the armed forces. Moreover, the impact of the pandemic on the education system must be read in a double note: the concern for the internal and international solidarity of a country, and respectively, the concern about how generations of students affected by the health crisis will be able to integrate, with social and personal benefit, in a future labor market about which, beyond competitiveness, we cannot say much today. A number of international organizations have already claimed that much of the educational gains of the last decade have been lost due to the disruption of school activity around the world.

The concern is legitimate and urgent, because beyond the elements related to the preparation for professional life, the school transmits social skills that are equally important, if not more so, as professional skills. Even a cursory glance at how the UN Human Development Index (HDI) is construc-

ted seems to confirm this assertion. The building of this index includes over 200 indicators organized in three dimensions: a long and healthy life, knowledge and a decent standard of living. The school, along with living conditions and life expectancy, is an element that seems to give definition and shape to the current human condition.

WHAT WAS LOST

In the first place, the direct relationship between students and teachers. The so-called “classroom activity” is an articulated complex of activities aimed at transferring multiple knowledge (factual and procedural) from teacher to students. This fundamental relationship was already undergoing significant changes, related not only to the modification of the tools available to the teacher, but also to the overall vision, the philosophy, if we may say so, about the formation of the young generations. From the figure of authority (given the age and the monopoly of knowledge) to the figure of the partner in discovering things that deserve to be discovered and used, the role of the teacher was already in a changing process. The type of relationship mediated by the digital universe is not necessarily equivalent to the relationship in the classroom space. This change in the educational paradigm is, in the long run, more important than the changes in classroom technology, because the new roles of the teacher are those that constitute the framework for the use of technology. Especially for young students, the proximity of the teacher (and the way he understands and assumes the roles in the classroom) is fundamental. Beyond the familiarity of the relationship (after all, most students are living in a world of adults concerned about their development), the teacher com-



municates also non-verbally with his students: his positioning in the classroom, the way he moves, gestures and facial expressions contribute when transmitting information. The students, in the process of socializing and acquiring social communication skills, have only to gain from their exposure to this type of communication, and the absence of this stimulus, along with cognitive and emotional gain from socializing with classmates and school,

can have significant consequences in adulthood. In fact, this lack of socialization is the element that - at least for organizations concerned with child development - raises the most pressing questions. Unlike learning content, social knowledge cannot be compressed or replaced, it cannot be approached selectively. Here is, in fact, the problem, because in socializing between peers, students practice behaviors, skills and knowledge that can ensure a good

integration into the world of adults.

In addition, the emotional dimension of learning is diminished accordingly. Emotion is an important element in education, as it contributes to the mobilization of students’ cognitive resources and allows them to cope with a special kind of stress, the stress of learning.

Secondly, the possibilities for feedback are drastically limited. Here it is necessary to introduce a series of terminological clarifications. In English, the terms assessment and evaluation translate elements that are very different, namely those that measure progress, respectively the achievement of a performance standard. The Romanian education system is strongly dependent on the grading at national level, that is on the measurement in relation to an a priori performance standard; progress measurement, on the other hand, is neglected (even if an initial test was introduced). Classroom activity allows the recovery of this dimension. In the conditions of online teaching, the feedback that the teacher can provide and that can guide the student in measuring his own learning progress loses two fundamental qualities: proximity in time regarding work task that mediates information about learning, and comparative dimension (the performance of a student in relation to the performance of the rest of students in the same class).

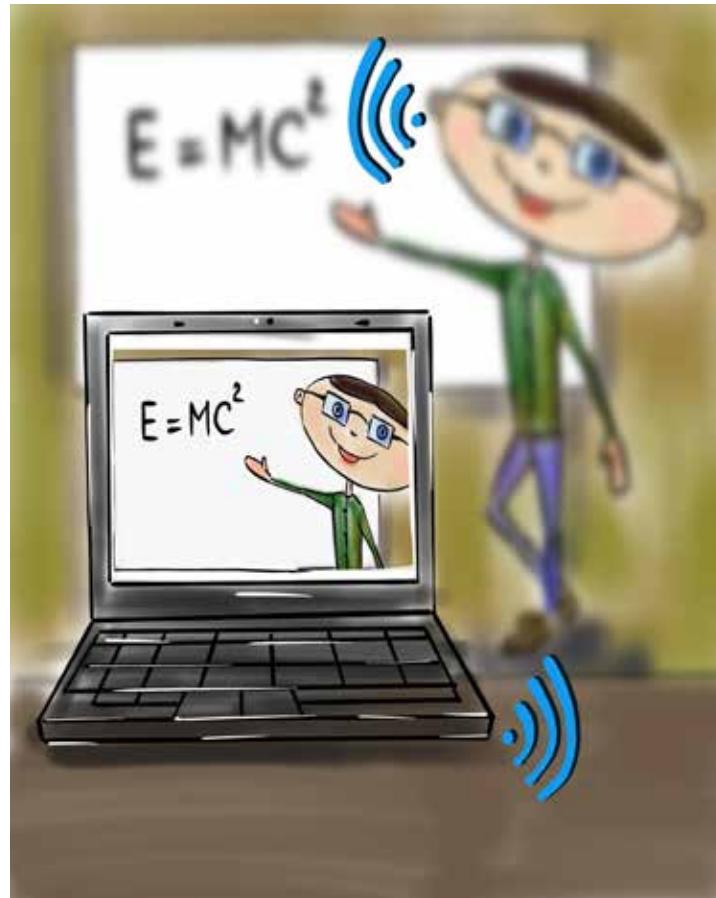
Thirdly, the increase of the degree of insecurity feeling of teachers, especially in situations where they have classes with whom they have not worked previously. Much of the effectiveness of teaching and learning depends on the familiarity of the two partners involved in the training process (teacher and students) with mutual expectations. The digital environment, fundamentally equalizing, raises

issues when communication is hierarchical - in the end, the relationship remains unequal, even if only because one of the two poles has more responsibilities than the other. Teachers have fewer tools to identify training needs (in cognitive, instrumental and emotional terms), which can also translate into increased conservatism in pedagogical reflection (which is only partially dependent on the modernity of the communication environment). In other words, the teacher is confronted with the loss of normal behavioral mechanisms, which only increases the degree of insecurity and limits the possibilities of communication (the risk is that the teacher focuses too much on what she/he has to do and for which she/he does not have routines built yet and less on students' reactions).

WHAT WAS GAINED

Of course, online teaching does not have only negative aspects. There are a number of gains, some more obvious than others.

Firstly, an increase in design capacity. The digital teaching environment involves a more detailed design of teaching-learning-evaluation activities. This involves a more in-depth understanding of the programs with a special focus on the medium-term development of skills (which the new gymnasium programs propose). The design must take greater account of students' autonomy in learning and the diversity of information sources. As a consequence, the transformation of the teacher into a mediator and the abandonment of the role of information master is accelerating. Given that students must largely work independently also outside the classroom, the teacher is required to emphasize the procedural aspects of teaching, that means to highlight



the ways to ask questions, search for information, verify their veracity and relevance, to formulate grounded opinions. In other words, the current crisis only underscores the need to reorient teaching and learning from information to the ability to do something relevant with information - that is another way of saying that now the focus is on skills.

Secondly, the degree of student participation has changed. The recurring discussion about the visibility (ad litteram) of students in the virtual classroom indicates that the internal dynamics of students group is changing. A number of teachers indicated that students less involved in class activities became much more active in the virtual environment. It is debatable whether this situation is the result of the influence of the environment, or is the result of deeper processes of negotiating roles within the group of students. In any case, most digital platforms offer the possibility of teamwork, of autonomous activities (also in groups defined by the teacher) and of real-time communication. The ability to adapt to this new communication environment tends to become a criterion of aggregation within groups of students who, although present for some time, was somewhat blurred by other elements (from clothing to possession of the latest phone model or sportive performance).

Thirdly, the increase of the number of sources available to students when they learn (during online activities or when preparing homework). Even though they were available before the sanitary crisis, they have now become everyday tools. Hence the inherent risks related to the quality of sources, their relevance for teaching-learning, the change of emphasis at the level of teaching from the use of sources to their management and information processes. The concept of information ecology is now becoming an increasingly important element. The growing problem is not what information to use in teaching, but what are the best tools to help students in selecting and processing an increasing amount of data.

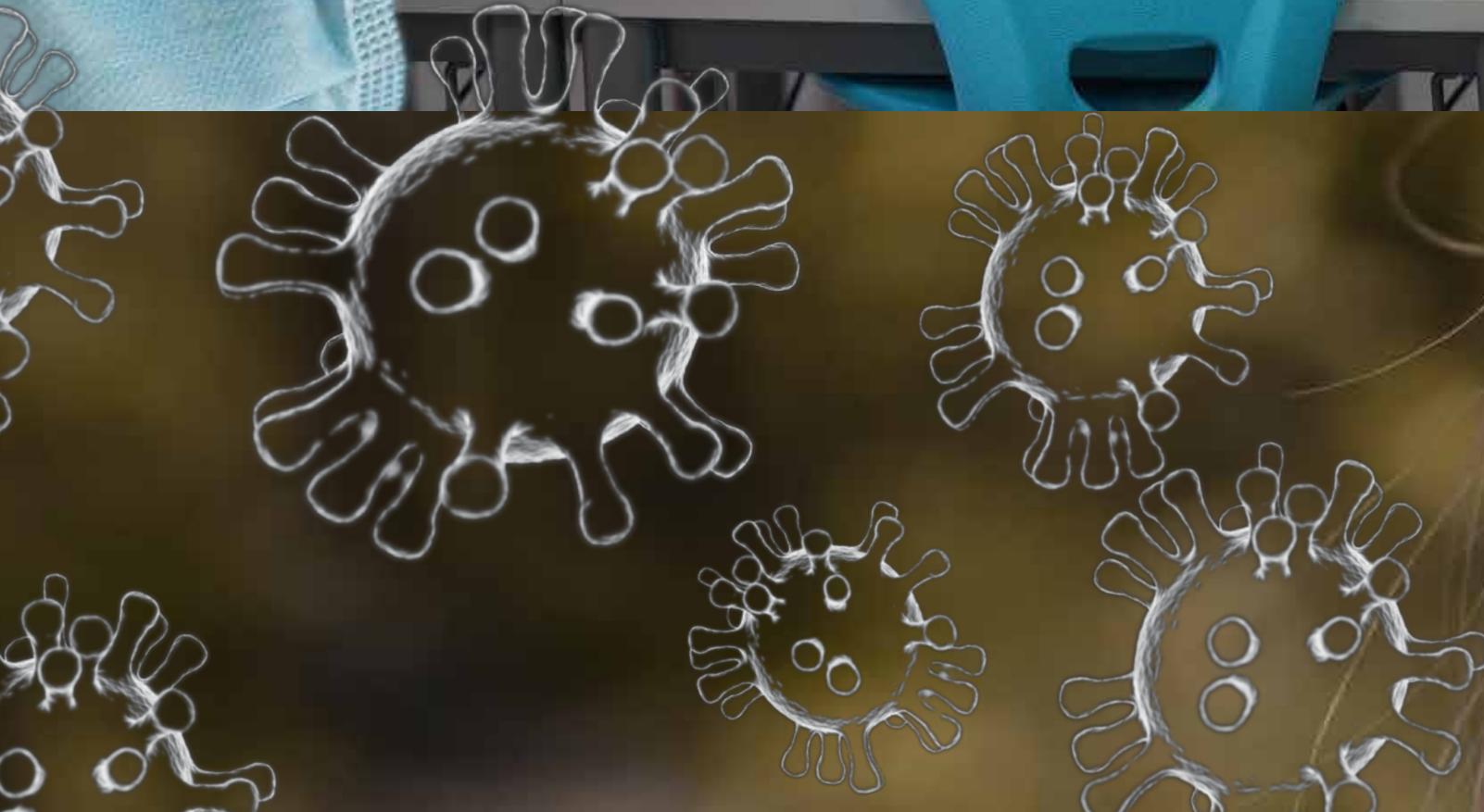
Fourthly, the questioning of the relationship of teachers with other groups with vested interests (stakeholders). Although their participation has been established for a long time, only the current crisis has highlighted the fact that the relationship between the school and these groups (especially parents) is a tense one.

This relationship is to be researched, but - at least in the medium and long term - this relationship will have to be based on new foundations. In any case, the degree of parental involvement in school life has become much more significant, and this is, with all communication problems, a very important gain. After all, the evolution of the young generation is a responsibility shared by all adults, and the absence of constructive discussions does not help at all.

INSTEAD OF CONCLUSIONS

As in many other cases, the situation is not just good or just bad. Rather we are dealing with a mosaic in which the negative elements are doubled by the positive ones. Losses are balanced by gains that will be predominant in the long run, to the extent that we will act wisely. Obviously, at the level of knowledge and at the level of socialization there are losses. Equally, they are blurred by the rapid digitalization and increasing emotional maturity of students, who are faced with roles that, a year ago, we would not have considered.

Likewise, the situation in which many parents found themselves, namely to participate in the training of their children, made them look at the school activity in a new light. It remains to be seen to what extent and how the 2020 experience will be used in reformulating educational policies and practices.



ASPnet in the year of the COVID-19 pandemic

Romania became part of this large network of UNESCO associated schools 50 years ago. The 70 institutions that constitute ASPnet in Romania today would have deserved a year in which to come together, to celebrate together the membership in the great family of schools that promote UNESCO values in the world, to encourage their students to get to know each other, around the values they have in common. The lockdown amended these plans and imposed other forms of celebration of UNESCO projects.



LEARNING ABOUT THE ROMANIAN CULTURAL HERITAGE

The only activity that brought together students and teachers from ASPnet schools took place in early March, just two weeks before the declaration of the pandemic, and was dedicated to learning about one of the most popular regional traditions registered on the Intangible Cultural Heritage List: the cultural practices associated to early spring. Presentations by ethnologists Ioana Ruxandra Frunteleta (University of Bucharest), and Ciprian Voicilă (Museum of the Romanian Peasant), the exhibition "Tradition of the Mărțișor in Maramureș" by the photographer Ilie Tudorel, and the workshop of creation of the „Mărțișor” according to the Maramureș tradition, supported by Mrs. Maria Marinca, brought joy to the faces of children between the ages of 12 and 17 and to the headquarter of the National Commission.





AMIRA LIVIA SAUCIUC ANDREI MIRCEA LUPULEASA



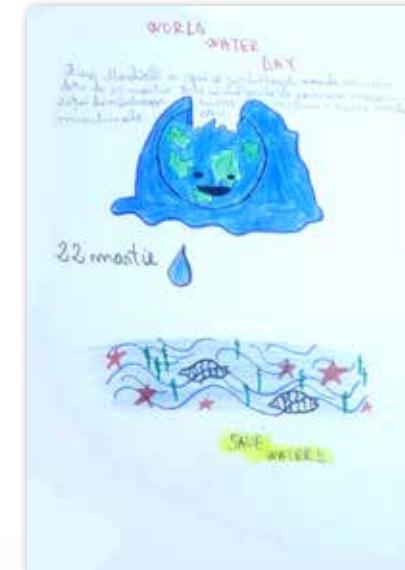
RADU LUCIAN FARCAȘ IUSTIN GHEORGHITĂ

LOOKING AT THE STARS AT THE NATIONAL COLLEGE IN IASI

In the spring of 2020, the year their high school turns 192 years old, four students in their final year of study at the National College of Iași became the national winners of the NASA - Scientist for a Day competition. Their essay, dedicated to Pluto's greatest moon, Charon, has advocated to transform this mysterious satellite of our solar system into a priority for the space research: "Charon, with its position in the universe, as well as its characteristics, may hide some of the deepest secrets of the universe. As mentioned earlier, there are hints that this moon could have an internal frozen ocean today. Moreover, a lower than predicted atmospheric evacuation rate forced scientists to fundamentally revise earlier models concerning Pluto and its satellites. As such, there is a slight probability that forms of life will be discovered there, but if not, the data collected may provide information regarding unknown chemical materials or a type of extinct organism."



Charon



THE INTERNATIONAL WATER DAY ONLINE

On the occasion of International Water Day 2020, on March 22, students from the "Toma Socolescu" Technological High School in Ploiești wanted to visually present what this wealth means to them. Unfortunately, unlike other years, each student worked independently, physically isolated because of the COVID-19 virus. It was a unique experience in unique times, but young people were united by

the technology that allowed video communication, through which one could give voice to the thoughts and feelings of this day. The activity was carried out in partnership with the MasterFace Ro Association and was presented on the WORLD WATER DAY 2020 website. It was a true online celebration of the earth, in which the voices of young people on digital platforms were accompanied by images of a planet fighting for a better future, a future in which people and nature are no longer in conflict.