

The Effectiveness of Online Learning in Pre-University Education During the Pandemic - The Case of Albania

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Abstract

Online learning was a challenge for education in general. The covid-19 pandemic forced the general closure of the population and made it difficult for learning to take place. Some developed countries had more opportunities and experience to practice online learning. Many other countries, particularly developing countries, encountered extraordinary difficulties during this process. The lack of experience, digital infrastructure and investments in online learning face the Albanian education system with many problems. During the pandemic, there was a commitment of teachers to overcome these problems, but the results were low. In order to understand what was the level of online learning in Albania, we will present, through data collected from online questionnaires, the degree of effectiveness. Using direct interviews with students, teachers and parents we will explain the difficulties encountered as well as their reflections on this way of learning. We will also compare the official documents with the data extracted from the study to bring some recommendations that will help in the development of this way of teaching in the future. The analysis of the collected data will be developed in a narrative way to elaborate the most complete understanding of the reality of online learning in Albania during the pandemic.

Keywords: Education, online learning, covid-19 pandemic, education system, Albania

Introduction

Change management is difficult in the "ideal" case of a preliminary planning, which assumes that the parties are prepared for the change, understand it and aim to achieve the desired change. In the case of the pandemic, the change was forced, given the general conditions of the Albanian education system, which, unlike other developed countries, is far from being prepared for alternative learning, including online learning. The axis of change lies in how each one copes with this reality (Fullan, 2010). Researchers have grouped the challenges that online learning produces in this way:

Pupils' passivity. It is related to ready-made materials in power point or other forms which make students "lazy" by denying creative learning as a condition for their further development;

Teaching strategies and pedagogy. The classical lesson provided with physical participation provided the possibility of participation and cooperation with and among students. Now this is very difficult which means that teachers have to change their strategies as well as their pedagogical preparation in function of this form of teaching;

Maintaining contact with the students but also with the staff. The number of students is high to apply such a way of learning. This causes a great burden for both teachers and students. Online learning platforms are often limited in number, especially, as in the case of Albania, when mostly platforms that offer free services are applied.

Lierature Review

Discussions regarding the effectiveness of online learning have been dynamic during the pandemic as well as after it. Online learning and its uses were discussed for their importance to interaction and communication with peers and instructors in the classroom. Because of this, participation in online, group-based learning offers more powerful opportunities to develop skills and knowledge than an individual, self-paced course (Piskurich, 2004). Guidelines for the development of online learning were published during the pandemic to develop it as effectively as possible (Smith, Fisher, 2020). Researchers developed multi-complementary approaches to evaluate the effectiveness of online learning during the covid-19 period (Batdı, Doğan & Talan, 2021). The transition from classroom to online learning was associated with results that describe an overall successful transition in terms of student academic outcomes and learning standards. However, this is far from saying that the transition was a runaway success. Students reported high levels of stress and anxiety, two-thirds had difficulty concentrating in online learning, and few students were ready to continue studying online (John Lemay, Bazelai, Doleck, 2021).

The only way seems to be the injection of online learning as the form of education in the future (Montebello, 2018), and the challenge is to adapt to it. Online education is changing rapidly, with the creation of flexible learning technologies in the corporate and education sectors, the global online education market is projected to reach \$350 billion by 2025 (U.S. Career Institute, 2022). In countries like Albania, this path is quite difficult and the data presented below prove this.

Search results

As a result of this work, we have carried out a questionnaire for teachers in which the questions are almost the same as the questionnaire carried out by the Ministry of Education, Sports and Youth in Albania in March 2020. From the start I must emphasize that there is an extremely frustrating teachers' response to such questionnaires. It is regrettable to note that teachers do not freely express their concerns but are satisfied with the "oriented answers" from the "online learning survey" (ASCAP, 2020) itself, in which results are produced that are not only replicable but present to society a reality fake. As far as it is understood, the power and its influence is high and does not allow the teachers to have the freedom to minimally witness the truth that they themselves have faced during this period. For example, in the survey of the ministry, it is found that 96.8% of students are involved in online learning. Meanwhile, from the data of the World Bank report, regarding the "availability of effective digital educational content from the perspective of school principals", prove that only 31% have the opportunity to realize an effective digital educational content. This big discrepancy is enough to understand the pressure with which teachers fill out the questionnaires that are applied by MASR. We also noticed this in the free interviews conducted with different teachers who testify to a completely different situation in reality.

In this situation, help to teachers was almost minimal. There was no real training for teachers to understand, change and implement a teaching in these conditions. Teachers were not able to apply techniques that make it possible to verify the acquisition of knowledge by students. The structure of the lesson is no longer the same and the stages of the classical lesson are not realized. This is also because students cannot engage in interactive communication and interact with each other as the best way to achieve this goal. Play, touch, activity, activities and group work are missing and students with different learning abilities are limited. For example, those students who have developed visual or even repetitive skills may be favored but other students who have meditative skills and need reflective time to produce an analysis are marginalized. Thus this communication remains formal and without the intended final product. Communication between teachers and students faced great difficulties. Since communication is the transfer of information from one person to another or from one group to another, then effective communication is a process of exchanging ideas, thoughts, knowledge and information in such a way as to fulfill the purpose or intent in the best possible way. In other words, it is nothing more than the expression of the sender's views in such a way that the recipient understands better (Alawamleh, Mohannad Al-Twait, Raafat Al-Saht, 2020).

With a completely arbitrary decision in 2018, in the middle of the school year, the government of Albania decided that lessons should be 90 minutes long. Among other things, the goal was to "lighten students' bags" as well as to have enough time available for students and teachers to ask questions, to complete tasks and the

necessary preparation for the coming class [...] this change must necessarily be it is accompanied by the change of texts and their adaptation (Halilaj, 2011). This decision changed the structure of the organization of lesson plans and immediately disoriented the way of structuring the lesson. The reason is related to completely objective factors. First, 45 minutes is determined after multifaceted research and has been determined as the most optimal time to study a certain subject. The mechanical compression of lesson plans was an unprofessional blow to the pre-university education system. Secondly, it turned out that even challenges like the pandemic, which we hope will be temporary, reveal this initiative. During the online learning, knowledge had to be given about two learning topics in each subject. It is impossible to talk about results in the conditions when you have to stay 90 minutes in front of the phone or computer explaining a long series of concepts. The competencies we talk about in the curriculum are completely impossible to achieve.

151 teachers from all over Albania participated in the questionnaire carried out as a result of this work. Of these, 49% are 9-year school teachers, 31.8% are primary school teachers and 19.2% are secondary school teachers. 84.8% are women and 15.2% men.

The Ministry of Education, Sports and Youth (MASR), the Agency for Quality Assurance of Pre-University Education (ASCAP), drafted a guide for the start of the new school year 2020-2021 in which the scenarios that can be followed for the development of the school year are defined. The guide foresees three possible scenarios for the development of the learning process:

- learning at school;
- combined learning (at home and at school);
- learning at home (online).

The scenarios will be implemented depending on the infrastructure of the schools, the number of students and the spread of the virus (ASCAP, 2020).

The questionnaire shows that 73.5% used the first scenario, 22.5% the second scenario and 4% the third scenario. Although 97% of them say that "the school has chosen the right scenario, in accordance with its conditions", the management of the teaching-educational activity within the relevant scenario has encountered great difficulties. From the interviews conducted with different teachers, the problems encountered are easily understood. The most frequent answer is: "We are managing it with great difficulty." The teachers, 94% of them, say that the plans for the development of the lesson have been presented by the leaders. To the question: "Does your school have the conditions to respond to the scenario you have selected", 63.6% answered that "it has all the conditions" and 36.4% "it has some conditions". In short, as it appears from the data, despite the fact that from a procedural and formal point of view the instructions were mainly implemented, the result is that difficulties were encountered in the application of the scenarios proposed by the state authorities.

7.2% say that there is no water in the school, 2.6% that there is no electricity in the school and 8.6% say that the anticovid measures in terms of hygiene are not implemented. Although these data are low numbers, when they are spread over all the republics and a number of students, they are very problematic when we take into consideration the time in two school years of these scenarios.

From these data, it results that online learning took place in 37.1% of schools, 62.3% from home and 0.7% from another place. The reason why this happened is related to the fact that 62.3% of teachers say that the school does not have internet to guarantee online learning. This result shows that the schools did not have the opportunity to create conditions for the development of online learning.

Technological equipment is lacking, when a family may have more than two children in school and it was impossible to provide them for each family. The ability of parents to equip their children with technological devices depends on the economic opportunity, which in the conditions of the pandemic has shrunk significantly. Rural areas, children with special needs, families with unemployed members, families in poverty or even families that can be considered as middle class in the "economic classification cards" are unable to cope with this problem either with equipment or with internet. The teachers taught the whole family as the co-presence of all the members made the teachers face the parents.

The students of primary education and especially those of the first grades found themselves in great difficulty. Stress and great pressure on all actors is a reckless factor. Mostly the children of the lower classes fail to adapt to this way of learning and direct observation shows that they have difficulty understanding the procedure of such a way of teaching. When the students were involved in online learning, they were busy and the teacher found it quite difficult to maintain the rhythm and order of the students' speech, but the students were also unfocused to respond to this way of learning.

Of interest is the result for some very direct questions that we posed to the teachers. 80.8% say that they provide the Internet themselves and 19.2% say that the school provides it. On the other hand, 94% state that the material basis (internet, laptop, camera, cell phone, etc.) for the development of online learning is provided by the teachers themselves and only 6% is provided by the school. It turns out that 57% of teachers conducted the lesson through a mobile device, while 43% used a laptop or computer.

These data are dramatic because the expenses that had to be incurred by the teachers were very large. Regarding this, 33% of the teachers stated that they were not trained for the development of the scenario they had selected as a school. 77% of the teachers stated that they did not have special rooms for the development of online learning in their school. The state was not involved in easing these conditions in order to guarantee effective teaching in online conditions. What is of great importance is the

fact that 94% of teachers see classroom learning as the most effective way of learning and not online learning.

Online learning platforms

The lack of secure and specific platforms to guarantee secure communication was one of the major problems of this period, which involved all levels of the educational system. Platforms must guarantee the possibility of professional communication in function of specific subjects and knowledge for each, such as having options that enable the learning of both exact sciences and humanities.

In pre-university education, the akademi.al platform was mainly used, which was designed by an Albanian student. This platform received the approval of the Ministry of Education and Sports in Albania and then in Kosovo it also received official approval. Also used was the zoom platform which had a duration of 40 minutes. Google classroom that required a gmail email address. Other platforms that are used in Western countries such as "Microsoft Teams" or others were not used in pre-university education students as they are expensive. The designer of akademi.al himself admits that this platform cannot be compared in terms of options, possibility of use and capacity with other platforms that have been designed by leading companies in this direction. Akademi.al usage was at minor levels beyond fictitiously produced figures. From the data of the questionnaire that we conducted for the effect of this study, it results that out of 151 teachers asked about the use of the akademi.al platform, it turns out that the question "Do you use the akademi.al platform" was answered in this way: 39.1% answered "YES", 44.4% answered "SOMETIMES" and 16.6% answered "NO". This result proves that the use of this platform was at low levels, while the quality of its use was still quite difficult to measure. The Albanian state did not intervene to buy such a platform to guarantee the safety of its use and the guarantee that no one abuses it.

Media and its role in online teaching

The lesson broadcast in "rtsh school" is a reading of power points prepared by the teachers. It should be noted that almost all countries integrated national televisions to enable teaching. The teachers recorded the lesson for each topic, subject and year in order to familiarize the students with the relevant topics. This particular bud seemed like a very good solution since the national public televisions cover the entire territory with a broadcast signal and it was practically thought that all students, except for those who did not have a television, would have the opportunity to attend classes. However, as reported in the material of the World Bank: Although the countries of the Western Balkans have wide access to television, which helps to guarantee a minimum level of equality of opportunity, this instrument is not sufficient for quality teaching(The world bank, 2020). The main reason is related to the impossibility of creating classroom conditions in such a transmission. There is a complete lack of interaction and students with special characteristics who do not manage to get the right knowledge.

It is worth noting the fact that public state televisions do not have the highest viewership even though they have the widest coverage. Practically, it does not have the desired impact. Although the survey carried out by the Ministry of Education, Sports and Youth states that: "The lessons broadcast on the TV program "RTSH SCHOOL" are followed by the majority of students, parents and teachers: 84.1% of students, 85% of parents and 96.5% of teachers. Those who have not been able to watch the broadcasts, access the videos on the YouTube channel of the Ministry of Education, Sports and Youth (54.2% of students) or even on the akademi.al platform (64.2% of students)"(ASCAP, 2020). Meanwhile, the survey conducted by us shows that only 40.4% have used this channel to get the necessary information.

As a result of this work, we carefully followed many lessons conducted by teachers on behalf of the *rtsh school channel*. For a teaching topic, the average time is less than ten minutes. The presentation is made with power point and the teacher reads this short material.

There was no initiative from private national televisions in terms of teaching. Perhaps it was among the key moments to prove that they deserve the "national" license if they would take initiatives to promote such teaching or to create spaces that help in this direction.

Portals on the other hand were completely disconnected from the process. There was no initiative to record lessons from experienced teachers who could add their clicks. Not even a site that gets millions of clicks for trivia was involved in awareness raising or perhaps more creative initiatives to attract attention. While their power has increased significantly and especially young people are the biggest followers and secularists.

So, if we talk about the mission that the entire spectrum of the media should have displayed in terms of awareness and application of opportunities to spread online learning in all forms, we notice that there was no interest. Having no obligation from state bodies, the "conscience" to contribute turned out to be "unconscious".

Conclusion

- Online learning in Albania has encountered big problems;
- There is a lack of technical conditions to realize it;
- Teachers were not trained and did not have the expected effectiveness in results;
- Online learning platforms had a very low usage and did not boast professionalism;
- The media was used in order to transmit the lesson, but technically it turned out that the school had a very low impact on the students' learning;
- The lack of investment in the online learning organization brought consequences that have not yet been calculated.

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