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Dolna 17, Warsaw, Poland 00-773
Tel: +48 226 0 227 03
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THE IMPACT OF PANDEMIC ISOLATION ON THE PROCESS OF EDUCATION

Violeta Lyubomirova Georgieva-Hristozova,
Ph.D. in Education, Trakia University, Bulgaria,
ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0157-2046>

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ABSTRACT

This work discusses the problems of modern education due to the social and economic impact of COVID-19 on society, and it is an attempt to describe the new reality for many educators, along with prescriptions for mitigating the overall burden on the education process by imposing specific national and European policies. The theoretical narrative aims at informing the researchers in the area of education, as well as teachers, educators and to expand the horizons of many students, explicitly majoring in early education and pedagogy on important current topics of modern culture.

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Introduction. There is a common understanding of education as being a vital necessity and an essential guide to social development, which is why educational practitioners, theorists, experts, as well as parents, governmental and non-governmental representatives work together to find solutions in a time of challenges, such as economic, social or financial distress. Nowadays, sadly enough, humanity is facing a severe crisis in fighting the Covid-19, which continuum resulted in the acceptance of one new "normality" that in turn reshapes all areas, including the rather conservative field of education. The organization and implementation of the learning process in post-pandemic society demand that modern teachers and educators, to be committed to adequately addressing the current implications, with regard ensuring one of the fundamental human rights - the right to learn and in a broad sense with respect ensuring the protection and well-being of the community. This rough analysis requires serious work - from the conceptual level to the smallest practical details.

The modern pre-pandemic learner.

For most individuals, knowledge is the key motivator for personal growth and moral embellishment, while the process of thinking about society demonstrates the reflection on his condition. The common understandings in the 21st century, however, are marked by significant consumer nuances that seem to diminish the value of fundamental theory and its meaning for the physical, emotional, spiritual, moral, health, and overall progression of today's young people. It is difficult to generalize the learning pattern of all young individuals, and this work is an attempt to identify a significant part of this group. The presented description is not very attractive, and for that reason it should not remain hidden but rather highlighted to the modern specialists in the field of education. Education and society, regarded independently are mutually connected entities. The condition of each of them separately is carried as information to the opposite side. The society is developing and "demands" on the same changes from education so that the former can be useful for its qualitative formation and its full existence.

Based on direct observations on the expressed real and virtual behavior and a short test to measure the general knowledge with a group of five hundred students, all with pedagogical specialties, several unenviable patterns of modern students can be derived, as we are not trying to imply our conclusions in a general way to a wide population of students.

Modern young Bulgarian students are skeptical of the classical way of learning, which they find unattractive and boring. Their view is rather oriented towards achieving quick results and easy successes, which reveals their emphasized practicality towards education. Studying the theoretical aspect of a given problem leads to them asking themselves the question of whether this knowledge will be of practical use to them and quickly determine the need for intellectual connection with it or not. Here a major role plays the sufficiency of their social maturity for effective reflection given their formation as future successful individuals and good professionals.

The results of the testing show somehow degraded levels of general knowledge: spelling gaps, poor speech, poor argumentation, lack of ability for metaphorical expressions, and poor communication skills. We consider the main reason for this troublesome result to be insufficient time for reading practice in a very general sense, and an abundance of mental patterns with predominantly consumer characteristics, that can lead to damage to the development of the youth. This is supported by speculation with new pedagogical paradigms that interpret learning as entertaining, fun, involving minimal effort and maximum pleasure.

For example, all of the surveyed students gave an incorrect answer to the question which asks for the name of the Bulgarian city where the so-called "Danube Bridge II" or "New Europe Bridge". The same number of wrong answers were received to the question about the location of the city of Essen, as well as the question about the capital of Estonia. The questions related to the topics of the Bulgarian history and literature and even elementary math problems such as multiplying numbers resulted in 75% incorrect answers. However the surveyed students admit that the complexity of the test questions is not great, but despite their disastrous performance, 90% of the group pointed that the salary they deserve has to be as much as it is for a young teacher.

The modern learner in time of the pandemic

Not a long time ago, the word "pandemic" was mostly referred to as the historical account of great plagues and epidemics. Nowadays before Covid-19, it was unthinkable that history will repeat itself. The idea that everyday life during a pandemic will result in a New Reality, mostly associated with feelings of fear, adopting low-living standards, feelings of doomed feature, along with a general sense of apathy, results in a lack of will for long-term planning and goal setting. Physical limitations such as social distancing make it difficult to maintain high levels of spiritual freedom and proactive behavior.

Today, more than hundreds of countries have empty kindergartens, schools and universities, without any teachers nor students. At the same time, education should continue, in a new emerging form: distance learning. This idea is supported by two major learning concepts:

- (Classical) Distance Learning – synchronous or asynchronous learning, well established for many years, that now can be considered traditional. This learning is developed in many countries, studied by researchers and suitable for upper level students or accomplished individuals.
- Home education – a form of education for students that takes place in a home environment, led by the parents or by the aid of a remote assistant of a teacher. This form of distance learning is common for the western countries, where this is a matter of a personal choice of the family, but not very popular in Bulgaria.

In the specialized literature there are many studies referring to both learning concepts, as neither one of them is in the focus of the current theoretical presentation. This work focuses on a new form of education, imposed by the danger of the pandemic – compulsory distance learning, for which the world was unprepared, given the urgent and sudden or inevitable circumstances. Due to the fast spread of COVID-19, new forms of distant learning were implemented. Unsurprisingly this trend was regarded as something new and uncommon, hence the effectiveness of the entire education was about 10-15% (author's estimate). This type of training carries elements of distance and home training, but conceptually is neither one of the two already well-known methods. Here in the pedagogical perspective, the teachers face two main problems:

- Desocialization of the personality – The new form of distant learning becomes a test for new way of socialization;

- Depersonalization in education - The discontinuity teacher-student motivates the concept of "dehumanization" of education.

At the present, compulsory homeschooling takes place in an asynchronous environment and a synchronous learning is predominantly online. However in both cases it is clearly understood that the old, traditional, classical style of teaching cannot simply be "transferred" to E-space and be expected to work. We would rather assume that this effort would lead to unsatisfactory educational practice. For example, in asynchronous environment, teachers provide information, but do not use their pedagogical skills to internalize it by students, and in synchronous online environment, teachers have difficulties of various kinds - lack of respect or attitude issues from students, lack of technical means to support the online activities, including insufficient IT skills.

Forced isolation learning requires adaptability in three directions:

- Parents are unable to provide professional educational services and are powerless in unfamiliar territories, leading to tensions in family relationships;
- To achieve good results in this type of training requires a lot of self-control and self-determination in students, which can not be guaranteed in any way;
- Quite a few teachers do not have the cognitive and emotional readiness to use educational technologies.

Conclusions.

In recent years, the education in Bulgaria is in deep crisis due to many social and political factors. The pandemic of COVID-19 added more problems to already unenviable situation, mainly associated with the distance learning:

- The distant learning generally requires much more time to ensure same achievements, in comparison to the traditional learning;
- It leads to significant visual fatigue;
- The home environment is limited in didactic means;
- Most of distant learning lacks of clear feedback - teachers cannot understand whether what is being taught is interpreted correctly;
- The technological environment cannot allow teachers to work with all their pedagogical skills;
- The students are poorly motivated to "attend" in virtual classrooms;
- All didactic principles are obstructed and to the greatest extent the individual approach is obstructed, since the teachers are not able to assess the individual qualities of the student;
- Poor concentration in the home environment affects the principle of consciousness and activity;
- The lack of live contact affects the principle of accessibility; The remote learning approach also influences the principle of systematization and permanence of knowledge, skills and habits;
- The didactic methods are also deteriorated - it is not possible to carry out a quality discussion, exercises, practical classes, imitation methods and oral communication, as all have specific qualities and barriers in their implementation to the online environment. The methods for control and assessment of student's knowledge, skills and habits are also insufficient and unrealistic.

Pedagogical theory and practice are already in a new era that requires the development of appropriate new University didactics, changes in the pedagogical approaches, didactic forms and methods, and expanding the cognitive outlook of teachers and mentors, but also changing the studying attitudes in students. The education processes in general suffer by the implications of COVID-19, as the pandemic created an additional crisis and exposed the underlying problems, which are about to be officially recognized and addressed. The crisis in Education requires changes in the following directions:

- System changes in terms of flexibility in face-to-face interaction online and in homeschooling in relation to the specific physical needs and overall health of the students;
- Changes related in keeping the best practice of traditional education;
- Taking into account the needs of modern students, and ensuring the continuity in their overlook toward the classical theories that should provide same "intellectual commitment" as well as toward modern concepts for education.
- Implementing the pattern of Lifelong Learning for teachers - They should update their professional portrait with knowledge of modern educational technologies, which will later enable them to generate feedback and to bring more value from the traditional learning theories;

- Working toward conceptual change in the attitudes of students toward education. In essence, the major directions to work on are in understanding that educators carry high responsibility and that learning is a serious effort, requiring leaving the personal zone of comfort to achieve personal development and social well-being.

For pedagogical science and teaching practice, the coronavirus is a serious challenge that we all hope to be history sooner. Hundreds of countries urgently need to consider compulsory home distance learning and to prepare teachers and learners for the new postcovid reality, but still providing a high level of education. Adequate options need to be established for face-to-face training, which historically has proven to be the most effective, but until then the current European and national education policy should focus on the following directions:

- Open sourcing, free of charge for about 90% of the curriculum and overall educational content;
- Establishing of STEM centers;
- Provisioning of digital devices for online face-to-face interaction;
- Provisioning an auxiliary technological equipment;
- Developing dedicated online platforms for teachers for exchanging ideas and good pedagogical practices;
- Promoting innovations in teaching, learning and assessment;
- Providing incentives and expanding of Erasmus Programme.

If we look at the pandemic and all social and economic implication as the main source for declining of citizen freedom in general terms, we must recall the words by Delors saying that in time of deprivation, a man would grow and change accordingly and he would take vital steps to unlock the currently "closed" door to the "hidden treasure". The human mind develops while there is a purpose, where the goals are inspired from lack of comfort, freedom and gratification, and pave the path to development and innovation. The way out of this situation is the New Normal and its social and economic patterns are to be accepted and interpreted as a change in the social environment to which man with his intellectual adaptability is about to adapt. We all should accept this challenge after all.