Education in the Context of the Pandemic: A Look at the Case of Portugal

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic is causing structural and irreversible changes and transformations in individuals, families, companies, countries and in the world. There will be a society before and after COVID-19. Education is a pillar of sustainability and of society's future which is also being damaged by this world crisis. Professionals, students and family, the government, the educational system are looking for answers in record time. This brief article aims to share Portugal's experience, a country marked by a series of successive reforms of the national education system.

Keywords: *COVID-19; Educational System; Portugal.*

1. Introduction

The online environment is filled with activity in consequence of the coronavirus pandemic. Part of that is regular work and leisure activities, but actually an important percentage of that is new and is related to the telework and education field.

Millions of students have discontinued their classic style of education due to the pandemic. The world's educational system is undergoing transformations, adapting to new and challenging conditions that restrict the learning process of human interaction and transfer it to a forced virtualization. Data from March 24, 2020 published by UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) estimate that 1.37 billion students all over the world are now at home due to educational institutions closing as a response to the COVID-19 containment. UNESCO is monitoring the situation by country and providing updated information (UNESCO, 2020).

Little has been written about education in crisis situations. Bibliographical revision refers to a work promoted by several international agencies (e.g., UNESCO; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR); Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the Norwegian Refugee Council, the International Rescue Committee (IRC) and Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS)) and much less significant are research centres or universities' papers. These agencies guide their work by strengthening education - a human right and a force for sustainable development and peace – in situations of man-made conflict or natural disasters, defending that investing in education in times of crisis builds resilience and social cohesion across communities, and is fundamental to a sustained recovery.

A work that must be highlighted is the resource published by UNESCO in 2003 entitled "Education in situations of emergency, crisis and reconstruction: UNESCO strategy", as well as the Education 2030 Agenda, which aims to 'develop education systems that are more resilient and responsive in the face of conflict, social unrest and natural hazards – and to ensure that education is maintained during emergency, conflict and post-conflict situations'. At this exact moment UNESCO has experts around the world translating China's studies into various languages as part of the "Ensuring learning undisrupted when classes are disrupted" programme which was brilliantly implemented to ensure the education system's continuity during coronavirus.

Diving into the term "emergency education" a little further, it is used at inter-agency level to refer to education in situations where children lack access to their national education systems due to man-made crises or natural disasters. For UNESCO, an educational emergency is a crisis situation created by conflicts or disasters which have destabilized, disorganized or destroyed the education system, and which requires an integrated process of crisis and post-crisis response (UNESCO, 1999). For UNICEF "emergencies include natural disasters such as floods and earthquakes, and human-made crises such as civil strife and war", as well as silent emergencies such as HIV/AIDS, extreme poverty and children living in the streets (Pigozzi, 1999, p. 1). Sinclair (2001, p. 4) refers that "the term "education in emergencies" increasingly serves as shorthand for schooling and other organized studies, in conjunction with "normalizing" structured activities, arranged for and with children, young people and adults whose lives have been disrupted by conflict and major natural disasters".

The literature review confirms that the focus has been on war and refugees' contexts (e.g., Boothby, 1996; Preston, 1991; Sesnan, 1998). Pandemic situations had not been considered enough by the education field, although the pandemic that the world is currently facing fits these definitions, some of the principals based in others contexts can help the maintenance of educational systems in this current context, the reality is that educational systems and professionals were not prepared for this challenge. In this moment our society has more doubts than answers. Each country educational system, each school and each professional are now giving different answers. This article aims to reproduce a brief synthesis on Portugal's experience on the pandemic crisis.

2. Responses to the pandemic: Portugal's case

According to UNESCO (2020) the response has been taking place through a multimedia approach to ensure continuity in learning. This digitalization in education is new to teachers, students and families. Portugal in particular has a very heterogeneous cultural context in terms of access and skills related to new technologies. In 2002, statistics showed that 26.9% of households had a computer and only 15.1% had internet connection at home. In 2017, 71.5% had a computer and 76.9% had internet connection at home (INE, Pordata (https://www.pordata.pt/), 2019), these statistics show that it is still a country with shortage in equipment, and uncertainty in terms of user skills. According to the latest data published by the National Statistics Institute (https://www.ine.pt/), in November 2019, about 5.5% of

households with children up to the age of 15 said they do not have internet access at home. This may seem like a residual number, but if we consider that in basic education (between the 1st and 9th grades) close to one million students are enrolled, this could mean that an universe of about 50,000 do not have access to online educational resources. Studies in Portugal have shown that the main inhibitor/blocker of IT use are the level of qualification and demands associated with professional performance (Rodrigues & Mata, 2003). The fact that Portugal has a specific Ministry for digital transition (i.e., Ministry of Economy and Digital Transition) shows how crucial this issue still is for the country.

Portugal presents itself as a country with education levels below the European average. Considering mandatory education (12 years of schooling) in 2019, Portugal had 51.7% of its population completing at least high school between 25 and 64 years old while EU-27's average is 78.3% (Pordata - https://www.pordata.pt/, 2020). It has sought to combat lower education with various educational reforms. As an example, and because it is a distance experiment, we refer "Telescola" (Tele-school) between 1965 and 1987, as students would watch and listen through a standard cable television channel, allowing thousands to complete their fifth and sixth year of schooling.

Another important issue refers to the heterogeneity of the different education levels. If for some levels of education, it may be a challenge, for primary school it is a bigger challenge because they are children with little familiarity with new technologies due to not having access to them in regular classes and to their young age.

Schools closed on March 16, 2020 while the news were released by the Prime Minister on March 12. The state of emergency was decreed in the same week. It is estimated that in Portugal, 2 million of students are at home with no face-to-face lectures (UNESCO, 2020). The time that elapsed between the announcement of the schools being shut and the actual closing made it possible for teachers to prepare sheets and homework.

Note that, this present paper gathered information from social networks, media, contacts with parents' associations, teachers and students. Thereby, it is not taken as a report of an in-depth investigation which requires more time to be carried out and a systematic collection of information, but rather a reflection and share of the first days of experience on the pandemic crisis.

There are diversified experiences in the country, depending on the different education levels and schools. From elementary school to high school, teachers have been mobilized to provide students with study materials and exercises (that need to be registered and sent to teachers).

Only on March 27, the Ministry of Education published the Roadmap with 8 Guiding Principles for the Implementation of Distance Learning in Schools (Direção-Geral da Educação (DGE), 2020) with the aim of ensuring that all children and all students continue to learn in the present context, this roadmap is an instrument to support the Schools in designing the best strategy and plan for distance learning.

These guidelines envision different phases of preparation, internal debate, reflection, survey and definition of technological means among many other factors, letting each School, based upon the phase they are at and its reality, to reflect on the principles presented and on the development of their distance learning plan.

Up to this day, while this testimony was being written, there is no guide produced by the Ministry of Science and Technology and Higher Education – who is the one responsible for higher education - has been found. The time response and orientation of Ministries connected to education do not seem to match the pandemic's pace and the needs of the educational communities. There seems to be a government culture of silence related with educational issues.

For higher education there was only an announcement on March 16, 2020 by the National Union of Higher Education which highlighted that distance learning is a complementary resource that doesn't replace classroom teaching and requires an adaptation for the transition to online [teaching], because it is not a matter of merely recording and/or transmitting online lectures.

It has been reported that the rhythms and ways in which teachers and students are adapting to distance learning are very different. If there are success stories and motivated teachers with the opportunity to use new technologies, there is also a lot of uncertainty about how some vulnerable students are being followed. And there is a fear that social inequalities will worsen when the school depends on access to goods like mobile phones, computers and internet connection. The Ministry doesn't foresee students without Internet connection in its new distance learning plan.

Support groups, families and their communities are seeking to equip young people with resources (such as computers) in a wave of solidarity through social media. In addition, public discussion is focusing on the implications and ways of assessing students.

This pattern of reactions and concerns is being replicated in higher education. Yet there is a variety of experiences and reactions. There are institutions that are maintaining all the initial planning by readjusting to the online format, providing training and equipment to Professors in record

time, considering the maintenance of class schedules and exams performed on digital platforms. On the other hand, we have institutions that seek to readjust calendars and are considering class compensations.

3. Conclusion

The world may be increasingly vulnerable to pandemic situations and it is up to us as citizens of the world to prepare ourselves. COVID-19 is being a real test of endurance and resilience. Teachers, students, parents, society can respond in a few days. Each one of us needs to work to make education a human right and a force for sustainable development and peace. Portugal's responses seem to be emerging almost spontaneously from its communities rather than collectively as a country with the government's guidance. Even though it is precocious, the analysis of COVID-19's impact on Portugal's education allows us to see that as a system it was not prepared with equipment and skills resources. Teachers are left with only general guidelines, proving to be extraordinary adaptation forces. Values such as solidarity and persistence stand out. Important clues of the teacher-student-family proximity are a structuring factor, adaptation capacity and professionals and students' responses.

The foundations for maintaining education in emergency or crisis situations are applicable and visible on a daily basis in Portugal: the community-based approach to education, meeting the psychosocial needs, rapid response. Education in these situations can help to provide a sense of normality, restore hope, support psychological safety, protect the investment that children, families and nation have made in children's education (Sinclair, 2001).

We need stability in education to deal with this pandemic. We have much to reflect, learn and absorb from this situation, but it is certain that the Portuguese society is changing. The Ministry of Economy and Digital Transition will not need to prepare a digital transition program because it took place within two weeks and in the most abrupt and groundless way it could happen. Resisting to teleworking or distance learning has been compressed to the needs and maintenance of education's sustainability.

Looking at the two weeks suspension of classroom activities, Portugal's education is being managed with effort and dedication from professionals and families. It can be assured that even without a systematic global vision, education continues in these uncertain times, but in a baffled way, without active support from the Government.

The lack of tangible guidance and support resources for Education Professionals as well as the lack of familiarity with digital and distance learning tools in a daily classroom are considered barriers for both professionals and students. We should also treat the lack of competence in the area of technology and equipment shortage as a barrier.

This brief synthesis could be helpful for other countries and professionals, especially for their education practice experience in this current crisis situation, showing the value of maintaining school teaching during its process. Based in these first days of experience, the recommendations are that each education professional, each student and their families invest in the continuity of learning.

Despite the fact that during a pandemic, the biggest focus is on health, countries cannot leave education behind. The reality is that continued education and learning can function as a facilitator in adapting to the crisis, give motivation, expectations and challenges to students and families, as contribute to their mental health.

There is a need for the government to quickly establish standards of procedures or at least consistent guidelines for different levels of education looking at the practices of previous countries. It is not a good approach to remain silent and hold each school accountable, just as we are being told by the Ministry of Health every day, society needs Ministries to break the silence and show sustainable work in a visible way.

The material resources and training have to be provided quickly, as support of private IT organizations. Government entities linked to education have to be working in the same rhythm as health entities are. Also, educational institutions need to communicate among themselves, in the absence of State guidelines, as a consensus is needed for greater uniformity of practices, decreases mistrust, uncertainty and conflicts.

In the future and with collective investment, the country will be able to withdraw structural learning from this pandemic situation, leading to a review of the Portuguese educational system, initiated in the process of teacher training.

Acknowledgment

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