

# Difficulties of students

## Difficulties of students in Greece

On 10<sup>th</sup> March 2020, following some localised closures, Greece announced the closure of all educational structures, with immediate effect. Online remote – mainly asynchronous-schooling became the main form of delivery during the health crisis, resulting in the need for teachers and education leaders to quickly adapt to new and often unfamiliar circumstances. Schooling took the form of collaborative learning where the instructor and the learner communicate asynchronously with each other, the learners study in their own time and yet follow a schedule of assignments. Greece progressively reopened educational institutions to students from 11<sup>th</sup> May 2020. The second closure lasted from 9<sup>th</sup> November 2020 till 15<sup>th</sup> May 2021. Students' at high risk concerning health issues kept being taught online in special classes on a regional level while Special Schools remained opened during the whole academic year. In both closures, end-of-year examinations for secondary education were suspended following the decision of the Ministry of Education.

The shift from face-to-face to online learning caused several academic and social concerns for students, such as lack of academic support, lack of adequate resources to support online teaching, lack of socialization, stress, anxiety, and lack of motivation in attending classes. Academic concerns refer to learning difficulties, lack of attention from teachers, and increasing workload that have restricted students' ability to concentrate during online classes. Several authors around the world have researched students' academic concerns caused by COVID-19. For instance, Realyvázquez-Vargas et al. (2020) found that shifting to online learning affected students' academic performance and caused a lot of intellectual fatigue due to the increased workload. Also, this challenge involved a high risk of students dropping out of their courses. Moreover, the fact that the recording of the teaching sessions was not allowed added to the difficulty of the learners attending as they could replay it and use it as a later reference.

In an effort to provide targeted support and interventions for vulnerable children and families and facilitate access to digital education resources, the Ministry of Education in collaboration with mobile network providers, **ensured free access through telephone landlines, mobile phones and tablets**. The Ministry of Education also **issued specific guidelines for providing distance learning to students with special educational needs and staff from the Educational and Counselling Support Centres** continued to support schools and children with special educational needs remotely. **Digital features to enable access for those with disabilities were added to the digital learning platform**. To support refugees and asylum seekers living in Greece, the UNHCR and UNICEF **provided educational material**, essential items such as solar lamps and, in collaboration with the Ministry of Education, **translated the guidelines for distance education into 11 languages and dialects**.

Furthermore, in order to strengthen the internal world of the students, the Centre for Educational Psychology published **multiple reports guiding parents and teachers on how to support children and foster emotional resilience during the pandemic.**

The use of technology in the educational act provided a solution to the developments that followed the Covid-19 pandemic and entailed advantages such as flexibility of time and space, however, it had a negative effect on the teacher-student relationship as well as on socialization and student motivation.

**Patchy connectivity often led to inequalities in access** and presented difficulties for teachers and teacher educators in how they communicate and give support. Lack of internet connection, lack of support staff for students with disabilities and the lack of accessible digital material have been mentioned as the main obstacles to the effectiveness of DE. Families often have to share digital devices among many family members as well which limited the amount of time a student can spend learning online. It has also brought to the fore the problems students with special education needs face, as online learning offers opportunities to some students, but is unlikely to work smoothly for diverse groups of students (Zhao, 2020). Most of the students reported finding it **difficult to focus during online classes or maintain sufficient motivation.** During the second closure, in extreme cases, where there was no chance for the student to be supported at home due to severe learning difficulties, the schools could allow few students to come to school and attend the lessons from the computer lab. Also, the school psychologists and the social workers continued supporting the learners online when necessary.

In a crisis situation, in which people and students are in a state of stress, tension, psychological stress and possibly trauma, the educational process should not be limited to content issues, such as curriculum coverage but extend to collaborative issues, supporting and encouraging students and creating a climate of empathy and care that will help participants continue to work and enjoy the learning experience as much as possible (Bozkurt & Sharma 2020).

The new conditions, however, show that the ideal of an education that provides equal opportunities for all has not been achieved, educational inequalities still exist and digital gaps reinforce these inequalities

After months of closed schools and online teaching, certain conclusions can be drawn from experience. The vast majority of the teachers used the already existed teaching material and had to abruptly turn their classes into digital educational environment. Most teachers mentioned that online teaching and learning could increase the gap between more/ less motivated students. Admittedly, the learners who had most trouble adjusting were SEN learners and the disadvantaged ones who lacked the necessary equipment in order to attend lessons effectively. Few students – less motivated ones - refused to attend regularly and confronted the danger of early school leaving.

## Difficulties of students in Italy

During the emergency period, the students faced a new approach to school life, which in some situations multiplied the risk of demotivation, personal discomfort, with extreme situations of school dropout caused by the pandemic. The total closure of schools in the first phase of the emergency (March-June 2020) highlighted areas of weakness due to social situations, cultural and linguistic disadvantages. In the face-to-face development, with respect to these situations, the school, at a single and territorial level, implemented a series of support interventions (tutoring, psychological support, literacy and linguistic enhancement) both during normal school hours and with additional interventions, including thanks to specific and targeted projects.

The sudden and abrupt transition to a digital and distance only teaching / learning and relationships system has provoked in the weakest students a first reaction of total inability to adapt to the new situation. Daily contact with the school network and its actors was replaced by a series of interventions, especially in the first phase of the emergency, which failed to intercept the students, and their families, who were weaker. It was not just a question of technical difficulties, linked to the availability of adequate technological tools, but above all a system of relationships and support necessary to counteract demotivation, scholastic failure and dropout has entered into crisis. In the case of students with a linguistic disadvantage, this aspect is further accentuated.

In particular, for students aged 14-16, who undertake the high school path in Italy, these aspects were more evident. In fact, in the first years of high school, schools usually implement a series of actions that guide students in the new school path, which strengthen the relationships between students within the class, to create a serene and favorable climate. learning. In some addresses, moreover, much space is given to the operational dimension of knowledge, with laboratory activities and concrete experiences that improve the learning skills, especially of those with difficulties. In fact, our system provides personalized tools and individualized learning paths, with continuous monitoring and forecasting of daily tutoring activities, by older students and suitably trained teachers.

These situations are not only related to the digital teaching approach, although in some cases there are certainly apparently contradictory situations. The students we have in front of us are "digital natives", and therefore should not have major difficulties in using the most advanced technologies. In reality, when students are offered educational activities through the digital tool, they do not always appear to be able to understand the teacher's instructions and carry out the suggested activities. In some cases, there are also difficulties in the daily management of teaching practice.

Project Number: 2021-1-ES01-K220-SCH-000034434

The schools, in the various phases of the emergency, have prepared a schedule of lessons appropriate to the situation and in the general indications sent to students and families they have proposed methods of study and verification of learning as clear and shared as possible, the result of reflection of the teachers themselves and of experiences already carried out (blended teaching, use of multimedia boards, flipped classroom, web quests and the like).

In addition, to reduce the disadvantage and discomfort, the tutoring and psychological support activities have been rethought in the distance offering situation, to ensure a certain continuity of some actions considered essential in order not to lose the weakest students.

The supply of devices and hardware resources to families in difficulty has not always been sufficient to reduce the risk of abandonment; it has only partially covered the needs and expectations of students at risk. The element on which the intervention difficulties were greatest was the relational aspect. The students were forced to follow their learning paths, already revised and modified, in a situation of total isolation, aggravated by the external situation and other factors related to media communication.

The consequences of this situation were seen not only in the short period, but in the medium-long period. When we moved from distance learning as the only resource to an organization of school time in a mixed and alternating form, the difficulties that arose in the first period of emergency worsened further and the situations of risk, discomfort, and demotivation and therefore of dispersions were repeated, even after a first change in the health situation. The socio-affective and relational moments were not restored, and most of the activities in support of the student continued to be offered only with the technological tool.

To these aspects we must add a final element: the difficulty of communicating with families. Especially towards families with social disadvantage or linguistic disadvantage (immigrants, non-Italian speakers), communication, already difficult in the normal situation, has sometimes proved impossible, with an aggravation of the potential risk of abandonment and with a further general disadvantage for these more serious situations.

## **Difficulties of students in Romania**

In Romania, students' access to educational resources during the closure of educational institutions influenced the education process at both pre-university and university levels. According to statistics provided by UNESCO, Romania had more than 3.5 million students who were affected by the pandemic context during the state of emergency. An analysis by IRES (Institutul Roman pentru Evaluare si Strategie - The Romanian institute for evaluation and strategy) showed that 32% of pupils did not have access to a functional device (e.g., laptop, tablet, desktop) to carry out their online activities. Moreover, 12% did not have internet connection or had it but it was not powerful enough to allow online teaching activities. According to the data provided by NIS (The Security of Network & Information Systems), only 66% of households in Romania had access to a computer with internet connection. Moreover, in rural areas, access was even lower, with only 48% having access to a computer and the internet.

Our research shows that students managed to maintain contact with the educational institutions and teachers by using a range of devices: online platforms, telephone, e-mail, or social platforms. However, it took students some time to integrate online learning into their life as school was not part of their online culture. Online activity was part of their free time and it meant socializing with friends and gaming.

Studies found that the challenges in moving into the virtual environment *affected students educationally, emotionally and socially*. *The educational dimension* refers to the relations between students and teachers, the teaching, learning, and assessment processes as well as the open access to educational resources.

*The emotional dimension* refers to the well-being and emotional state of the students during the period of isolation. The pandemic crisis, especially during the peak of restrictions, primarily impacted students emotional states, perceptions, and behavior. Students experienced high levels of anxiety, depression, and tension (Cioca, L.-I.; Bratu, M.L. Sustainable Education in the Context of COVID-19: Study of the Social Perception and Well-Being of Students at the Faculty of Engineering in Sibiu, Romania). The lack of perspective and major changes in the education system generated a state of uncertainty, concern, and stress. Students' reactions during the isolation period and their frequency cover a wide range of expressions of emotional states that they experienced: boredom (with a very high frequency), irritability, and fear. The other manifestations (intolerance, aggression, bouts of crying, abandonment, despair, and panic) also recorded quite high scores.

**Table 5. Emotional reactions during the state of emergency.**

Reactions	Mean (1–5)
Panic	1.83
Fear	2.06
Boredom	3.11
Peevishness	2.21
Intolerance	1.95
Aggressiveness	1.79
Despair	2.01
Crying	1.86
Abandonment	1.74

The sudden closure of schools in March 2020 and the switch to the online courses in schools combined with the state of emergency restrictions impacted students socially. The social dimension is related to the natural occurrence of socialization and interaction between individuals, which is part of our students' habits. Students' main dissatisfaction lay in the lack of student–teacher interaction and lack of socialization with colleagues.

#### **Who are the students at risk?**

*Children living in poverty or extreme poverty (rural or poor neighborhoods of big urban areas).*

*Children with special needs enrolled in the mainstream or special schools*

1. *Children living in poverty or extreme poverty (rural or poor neighborhoods of big urban areas).*

In 2019, 35.8% of Romanian children were at risk of poverty or social exclusion. Romania has the highest percentage of children digitally deprived among the European countries, with a rate of 23.1% (<https://www.salvaticopiii.ro/ce-facem/educatie/vreau-la-scoala/impactul-covid-19-asupra-educatiei>).

Many of these children have had difficulties:

- In accessing remote schooling due to lack of equipment (access device with an Internet connection),
- Lack of Internet signal in the area (or there was Internet connection around but only from a different provider than the one that was contracted by the Ministry).
- No support from the family to motivate the child to participate in this form of schooling; the family lacked the competences to help their children with their school work.
- No time-slot and space exclusively for schooling. Students were requested by parents for household chores. In this respect, some teachers said that for vulnerable students from rural areas, being present at school represents not only being in an educational space, but also a delimitation of education time that children are not provided with when they are at home and are urged by their parents to do household activities. Finally, this lack of adaptation of the school schedule partially contributed to some covered absenteeism. As a student recalled, being present and



Project Number: 2021-1-ES01-K220-SCH-000034434

engaged in classes at 7.30 in the morning is very difficult from home, the temptation of the bed being too strong.

*Governmental or local programmes* aimed to address these issues: but bureaucracy or even mistakes in implementing these programs slowed down the process - not all children have had access to these technologies.

## 2. *Children with special needs enrolled in the mainstream or special schools*

The research highlighted the following issues: the groups were too large; children lacked parental support, equipment, internet connection, etc.

### *Conclusions:*

Children living in poverty lost the most during the pandemic. The laws issued did not consider all the elements of the situation: ex. the fact that only families without any device qualified for obtaining a device, forgetting the fact that parents' devices are not always available for children to access the school platform; there were also flaws in implementing the laws). A high rate of early school leaving was registered during the pandemic: 15.3% in 2019 at national level and 22.4% in the environment rural.

## Difficulties of students in Spain

The exceptional situation resulting from COVID-19 had a direct impact on the teaching and learning processes in all schools in the country. The closure of schools from March 2020 meant that a system of distance learning was unexpectedly established at all levels and stages of the education system. This had a direct impact not only on teaching methodologies but also on adjustments to classroom didactic programmes and student assessment. Those facts also meant an impact on the daily life of the students.

The exceptional situation in our education system generated by COVID-19 required the Government, through the Ministry of Education and Vocational Training, to issue specific regulations. These adjustments were developed by the education administrations, in the exercise of their powers, in their respective territories to respond to the changing circumstances and effects produced by the pandemic.

The special needs of attention to students demanded an increase in material and human resources which, appropriately distributed by the Autonomous Communities, ensured that schools could develop reinforcement and support programmes for all pupils affected by the suspension of activities in educational centres.

It was necessary to establish a reinforcement programme for those students who were affected by the digital divide. That digital divide was about lack of infrastructure (particularly in rural areas), lack of accessibility to platforms, content and teaching processes themselves, and lack of computer literacy. Besides, skills that are needed to participate in the information society, as well as the ability to use this technology for learning and production of content are added to it. All of these difficulties were exacerbated in the case of the most vulnerable pupils for social, cultural and economic reasons, in addition to digital reasons, as well as personal circumstances arising from disability. In accordance with Spanish law, public administrations must guarantee the continuity of education for all students living at risk of poverty and vulnerability. In this circumstance, the so-called digital divide is a major hindrance, which must not be allowed to exclude learners.

When Royal Decree 463/2020 declared the state of alarm in Spain on the 14th of March, house confinement measures were adopted for the entire population, except for care service workers. From that date onwards, the suspension of face-to-face class and the closure of schools across the country became widespread. This suspension of face-to-face classes was accompanied by establishing distance learning and by the first proposals and measures adopted to deal with this new educational situation.

In order to overcome the initial differences between families and autonomous communities, it was generated a shock plan in which the different administrations – central, autonomous



Project Number: 2021-1-ES01-K220-SCH-000034434

and local one – were coordinated and in which NGOs with proven experience in the use of technologies were able to join in. This plan included the necessary investments in social protection policies so that families in situations of precariousness and poverty had future expectations for their children.

This emergency plan was based on an in-depth study of the living conditions and psychological state of the families and the repercussions on the socio-emotional state of the students too. The findings are related to different aspects:

- **Habits, consumption and leisure.** There was an increase in the use of television, mobile phones, video calls, series, etc. In some cases, sleep problems appeared as well.
- **Emotions, states of mind and “pro-social” behaviour.** There was predominance of worried and depressed states and, to a lesser extent, euphoric states were experienced.
- **Perceived social support and "pro-social" attitudes.** Solidarity and social cohesion were well rated and social support networks were functioning.

The resulting evaluations revealed difficulties in the pupil’s awareness, personal self-control, the possibility of rethinking life values, or the expectation of social change; as well as the personal impact of loss, fear, distress, vulnerability and effects on students’ social relationships.

The Ministry of Education and Vocational Training has supported the work of all sectors of the education community by providing educational resources for teaching and learning that students could use and which, to a large extent, served to alleviate their difficulties and needs:

- *Aprendo en casa* (Learning at home). Web portal that facilitates access to different resources, tools and applications to help teachers, families and students to continue educational activity during the period of suspension of in-person classes due to the state of alarm caused by the COVID-19.
- *Aprendemos en casa* (We learn at home). A special five-hour daily programme aimed at pupils from six to 16 years of age, launched in collaboration with *Radio Televisión Española (RTVE)*, with educational content that facilitate learning process during the suspension of classroom activity. It was created especially for students from socially vulnerable families who live in areas with network connection difficulties and for those students who, due to confinement conditions, have problems sharing bandwidth.
- Online learning resources. Website that aims to provide teachers, families and students with information on different types of resources (materials, training courses, platforms, tools, etc.) to use online.
- INTEF Virtual Classroom. Open Training “Resources for online learning” that provides practical information on the use and management of a virtual classroom as a working environment. Not only that, it also provides communication tools, content publishing, assignment submission, assessment, and a selection of means and tools repositories for creating learning resources.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

Project Number: 2021-1-ES01-K220-SCH-000034434

The immediate transformation of face-to-face teaching to online method gave rise to improvised emergency practices: there was no time or space for planning and designing the learning experience that are typical of an authentic online education. This exacerbated the difficulties and challenges that students had to face in our schools.

Important decisions were taken on the evaluation of the third trimester and end of the term, promotion or repetition. These decisions directly affected the curriculum of the students, who were adding curricular deficiencies that they overcame in a very difficult way. The duration of the closure ended up being six months as it coincided with the third trimester and lasted because of school holidays.

This long period of isolation from school, combined with unequal household circumstances, had very important implications from a quality and equity perspective.

Teacher-student interaction and the corresponding learning processes differ greatly by age and educational level.

Not forgetting that face-to-face classes are the essence of education, it is time now to leverage the effort carried out by the educational community and, especially, by the students to create opportunities for self-learning by using ICT, the dissemination of open educational resources and their accessibility, as well as multimedia platforms with educational content. Proof of this is the multitude of digital resources that were developed over the last two years, which exponentially increased their digital competence and their ability to learn to learn. These circumstances, the experience gained through online work, the demand for essential resources and greater autonomy should be seen as an opportunity to continue growing digitally, as it highlights the need to generate common projects.



Funded by  
the European Union

The European Commission's support does not constitute an endorsement of these contents, which reflect the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of this information.