

# Challenges of principals and teachers

## Challenges of principals and teachers in Greece

The rapidly evolving literature on the impact of the crisis on education provides an insight of the difficulties and challenges faced by the various education systems as well as the ways and innovations they have developed to adapt to new conditions. As aforementioned, remote schooling in Greece was divided in two periods. In March 2020, the first closure which in Greece lasted till 10th May 2020, came as a shock to all educational community. The sudden closure of schools meant that education policy makers, school principals and teachers had to find alternatives to face-to-face instruction in order to guarantee children's right to education. At the same time, the educational structures have to support adequately the teaching staff by providing the necessary material and technical infrastructure, guidance and training on DE and pedagogical use of technology. Additionally, the schools had to operate as a communication channel among the educational community, the students and their families (UNESCO, 2020).

School principals in Greece act in a dual way - they are both teachers and administrators. Restricted financing and lack of equipment posed loads of challenges and stress upon them. They should expand infrastructure, ensuring that nobody is excluded from online lessons, and support students and teachers to use online tools and technologies in an effective manner.

For the three first weeks, lessons were not held at all as everybody should stay confined at home. In the beginning of April 2020, School Principals were given permission to go to the school premises and support the educational act in any possible way. On this initial level, schools did their best in order to keep in touch with their students. Uploading teaching material on school sites, sending emails with learning material or even calling the students were practices used by the teachers.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, distance learning in primary and secondary Greek schools served complementary to traditional education, forming a schema of hybrid or blended learning. Pre-existing resources in the education system may have facilitated areas of Greece's response. The Greek Ministry of Education managed to advance the two existing platforms, namely e-me and e-class, so teaching could start in an asynchronous way. One month of distance education in Greece resulted in 95,692 teachers with digital classrooms, 643,871 student participations daily. The two platforms were often overloaded resulting in phenomena of 15.000 teachers trying to upload their teaching material at 5 a.m. Previously used by a small number of teachers and students, these formed the educational background on which many further digital efforts were built.

Additionally, the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs issued Guidelines for Distance Education, and collated a list of available resources. Greece mobilised pre-existing digital resources, such as online libraries of digital textbooks, digital lesson plans

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(<https://dschool.edu.gr/dschool2-project/services/ebooks/>) and introduced a new digital platform for synchronous online teaching (Cisco Webex) initially for upper secondary students and schools in regions first affected by closures. Distance teaching was quickly rolled out nationally across all school levels. Greece also introduced educational broadcasting via state television, principally for primary level students.

There was a great effort on behalf of teachers towards self-training and peer teaching. Lots of teachers report spending time watching videos on You Tube mainly that exemplified the use and usage of digital tools, applications etc. Webinars ran to support teachers in the transition to distance education. However, teachers felt lacking the appropriate support/training to meet the needs of students with disabilities. Although there is no substitute for face to face and hands-on learning, several innovative solutions, including the flipped classroom model, online practice questions, teleconferencing in place of in-person lectures, procedural simulation and the facilitated use of videos become the ways to mitigate loss of learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The effectiveness of online learning might have been hindered, in some cases, by the lack of basic digital skills among certain students and teachers alike, making them unprepared to adapt to the new situation so abruptly.

In the second closure (9th November 2020- 10th May 2021), there was a shift towards synchronous teaching through the «Cisco Webex» platform. In Greece, State school teachers used it exclusively as it was suggested by the Ministry of Education.

Transition to distance learning posed challenges and difficulties for the teachers, who additionally were not sufficiently satisfied with the interest and the participation of the students. Due to The General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), the vast majority of the students (and teachers) had their cameras off which led to poor interaction among them. Lots of teachers recall the feeling of loneliness and despair facing and teaching a “grey wall”. This lack of visual interaction led to students reporting that they were attending their lessons from their beds or even having the videoconference on while they were playing games or chatting on their pcs or mobiles. Another factor taken into consideration was that there were teachers who avoided using the Cisco Webex online platform for teleconferencing, as they stated that there was no guarantee of protection for students’ and teachers’ personal data as Cisco is a private company (Bakirtzi, 2020).

Admittedly, during online courses all along the pandemic period, differentiated teaching was not used to include students with special education needs, with teachers also showing increased stress, nervousness and anger on the uncertainty and difficulty of managing the current situation (Letzel, Pozas, & Schneider, 2020)

Teachers believe that online learning largely depends on students’ self-discipline. This requires students to understand the importance of online learning, parents to cooperate and help supervise, and for schools and governments to offer centralised guidance and support (i.e. an educational eco-system). The Greek Ministry of Education started in April 2021 a 10-hour training programme for teachers concerning the principles of distance learning and the creation of lesson plans but with no special focus for learners at risk.

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Based on a study conducted on 1,120 teachers (S.Nikiforos, S.Tzanavaris, K. Kermanidis, 2020), they reported they were not satisfied with the support received during the implementation of distance education: 20% (215) were very unsatisfied, 26.6% (287) unsatisfied, 26.9% (290) considered the provided support as neutral, while 17.3% (186) were satisfied and only 9.2% (99) were very satisfied. Regarding the provided support, teachers mentioned the virtual communities on the internet and the school support groups as their main support resources. Technological capabilities of the distance learning applications were regarded as rather satisfactory by the teachers. Overall, about half of them regarded distance education as important.

Concerning the strengthening of cooperation among teachers, students and parents was a measure about which Special Education teachers agreed with the highest percentage (94.3%), showing thus a statistically significant difference. In order to properly deal with the necessities of students with special education needs, it is necessary for educators to communicate with their parents, as the latter are the main supervisors for home education and the ones who offer feedback, thus helping teachers to develop individualised activities. (Parmigiani, Benigno, Giusto, Silvaggio, & Sperandio, 2020).

Considering the alternative of no schooling, online schooling has been an important tool to sustain skills development during school closures. That being said, there are still concerns that online learning may have been a sub-optimal substitute for face-to-face instruction, especially so in the absence of universal access to infrastructure (hardware and software) and lack of adequate preparation among teachers and students for the unique demands that online teaching learning pose.

## **Challenges of principals and teachers in Italy**

During the health emergency of the first period (starting March 10, 2020), school leaders directed their actions on some essential guidelines:

- a) The relationship with institutions, at central and territorial level
- b) The relationship with staff, teachers and technical / administrative staff
- c) The relationship with students and their families

On the first aspect, the Manager moved with considerable difficulty between the various inputs coming from the center (Ministry of Health and Education) and from the local level (Region, Municipality) The absolute novelty of the situation, in the very first period, has involved choices that are not always easy and without having certainty about the correctness of the decisions taken.

The Italian communication system, in the normal situation, is based on provisions that come from the Ministries (in the school, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Labor, the Ministry of Health), often supplemented by provisions and indications that arise in the territory (the Region of competence, the Municipality or the metropolitan area where the school is located), provisions which sometimes overlap and which in any case generate a multiplication of subjects that refer to the Head of the school. The level of autonomy of the individual school, guaranteed by a law of 1997, mainly concerns the organizational and educational aspects, while the autonomy of the individual school in the management of personnel and financial resources is much lower.

This last aspect is very interesting, because in the first phase of the management of the health emergency, school managers were primarily concerned with having data on the availability of technological tools (connections, hardware, software) suitable for design by families. and to the realization of a distance teaching. When situations of objective disadvantage were identified, immediate actions were taken, even in the absence of certain resources from an economic point of view, to provide essential tools in the management of new forms of distance learning. In some cases, tools available to the school have been temporarily proposed with free use contracts, new tools have been purchased to offer to the most disadvantaged families using the resources available immediately, without instructing long and complex ordinary practices.

The closure of the school premises then urged the Managers to tackle the problem of relations with the staff, forced to lockdown both in the didactic management (teachers) and in the technical-administrative practices (non-teaching staff). The need, in the initial phase, was above all the clarity and timeliness of communications.

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In this sense, some innovations already started in schools have certainly helped: the progressive digitization of administrative practices, the training of teachers on innovative tools in teaching and in the daily management of classes.

In the next phase (from September 2020 to spring 2021), the school managers organized the spaces and timetables in order to build different entrances and exits, in accordance with the local transport system.

We have switched to integrated forms of distance learning, with rotation of groups in the classrooms to ensure safety and paying particular attention to pupils with disabilities and with personalized teaching plans. The most critical situations concerned the control of the contagion, which in certain situations made it necessary to place entire classes in quarantine and slowed down the interventions in the presence outside on specific projects and activities, including motor activities.

### Teachers

The teachers in the various phases of the pandemic emergency carried out the activities according to the indications of the Managers, especially with regard to the timetable of the lessons held at a distance, with specific schedules to be respected to safeguard the health of the students, sometimes engaged for an entire morning, with the need to schedule breaks and breaks.

In preparing the teaching tools, the teachers started from their previous experiences, such as flipped classrooms, cooperative learning, reality tasks, trying to adapt these methodologies to the new reality of distance learning.

The first choice concerned the use of the platform most suited to educational needs, and mainly the resources offered by the Google suite were chosen, which with its applications made it possible to manage the lessons remotely, choosing the most suitable method (sincrona or asynchronous) and integrating the resources available to propose teaching materials and to provide students with transparent methods of assessment. With respect to situations of disadvantage, not only cultural but also socio-affective, the teachers made a careful selection of materials and activities to be proposed remotely in order not to leave behind the students who are most at risk.

For example, a first intervention concerned the simplification of materials, with regard to language and contents, with graduated and monitored interventions in the development of the learning processes. The use of google forms allowed students to be involved during the activities, a simple questionnaire in many situations revealed the critical areas, but also accepted proposals and suggestions.

One issue that managers and teachers had to face was privacy, the confidentiality of sensitive data, how to access the platform chosen by the school.

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The work of the teachers was supported by the technical staff, who controlled access by creating, for example, a single address with the e-mail provided by the school, avoiding the use of personal e-mail addresses. The flow of data created during the remote teaching phase was subjected to the controls required by the privacy regulations, and all communications from teachers to families were made taking into account these basic needs. In fact, maintaining a constant relationship with families was another important challenge for teachers and for the school as a whole: it is not just a question of informing families, but of making them aware of the exceptional situation and creating a moment with the family. active discussion in the various phases of the emergency, to understand the emotional reactions of the pupils and to better intervene in cases of demotivation, linked to the continuous stay in front of the computer or tablet.

The teachers did not propose simple online lessons to the students, which mirrored the traditional lesson, merely enriching them with multimedia contributions, but tried to facilitate learning paths by searching for applications available for free and easy to use (think of Kahoot), or by exploiting as much as possible the digital resources proposed in the text books.

In order to better intercept students with learning difficulties and / or academic discomfort in the distance teaching phase, in many cases materials specifically designed to make the contents accessible and follow the complex teaching process in each phase have been prepared on the virtual classes / learning. Digital resources, concept maps, guided presentations, links to videos and insights, stimulus images, in collaboration between the teachers of the same disciplinary areas.

One aspect on which teachers reflected a lot was that of evaluation. The subdivision between formative evaluations (path, process) and summative evaluations (at the end of a completed learning unit or a specific module) was maintained, but the students were also directed towards forms of self-evaluation and reflection on the path that they were carrying out, stimulating them to prepare documents and products to be presented also in the virtual environment, in which to evaluate the effectiveness of communication, the mastery of digital tools, the ability to maintain, even in an emergency situation, an ability to work on projects, to cooperate , to coordinate activities.

The teachers have moved along the same guidelines in the subsequent phases of Integrated Digital Didactics, in which the group of students in the classroom has put into play their ability to interact with the remote group, interpreting under the guidance of the teacher, the different role required in the two situations.

The good practices implemented during the emergency phase in the didactic field must still be a point of reference for a constant rethinking of teaching methods and learning processes. Distance learning represented a partial response to the emergency, certainly not without limits, but some ideas and processes can certainly be a reference even in today's face-to-face activity.



## **Challenges of principals and teachers in Romania**

Challenges principals and teachers have to face in tackling those situations with the appropriate approaches.

### **Analysis of the challenges in Romania**

- Lack of appropriate equipment and tools at the school & individual level (teacher/student)
- Unequal access to the online platforms, limited internet access
- The lack of adequate expertise in achieving hybrid or online education. Underdeveloped skills and competences in online work. Teachers had to rapidly improve their digital skills to cope with the situation created by the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Difficulties when digitising the materials teachers were supposed to use with their students: inappropriate content for the new way of working. They had to adapt the courses to the new teaching conditions but most of them did not have the necessary training. Teachers had to quickly adapt their curriculum of the subjects they teach to the online teaching. They had to choose the most suitable online platform for them and for their students. They had to choose the testing platform on which to run the student assessments and to digitise the tests according to the chosen platforms.

When delivering online classes teachers highlighted the following challenges:

- Teachers' struggle with time (online teaching is more time-consuming than in-school teaching).
- Low accumulation of new knowledge and low student participation
- Lack of control of the class at different levels
- Students' assessment in the online environment

Teachers had to create special tools in order to gain students' trust as much as possible, since they were reluctant to open webcams during online courses.

Teachers had to identify and learn to use special tools to motivate and stimulate students to engage/participate/collaborate in online classes.

Teachers had to diversify their online presence, appealing to social networks to be closer to students, to communicate better and more often with them.

Teachers had to increase the level of attractiveness of their courses in order to capture students' attention to online courses.

They also complained about the lack of direct interaction with colleagues, students and parents and cyberbullying.



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Teachers had to maintain the quality of education in the online environment that proved to be more demanding and complex than the traditional one. It was observed that teachers who had had digital skills coped better with the transition to online education. However, even they were subjected to great pressure to perform their required teaching activities.

Parents also played a very important role during this period. Teachers appreciated the good collaboration between parents and teachers and found it necessary; teachers/parents had to carefully monitor the behaviour of children/students, identify certain problems, help them become aware and guide them to solve the problems they faced.



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## **Challenges of principals and teachers in Spain**

In the middle of March and practically from one day to day, teachers and directors found themselves immersed in a new scenario: online education in the pandemic. 10 million students were at home and the entire education community had to engage in a distance learning education model without prior notice.

Teachers and directors in compulsory education made many mistakes arising from habits acquired in face-to-face education since they were unaccustomed to online education. The first step to solving them is, of course, to know them.

In addition to the lack of experience in working in an online environment, directors and teachers encountered other problems: increased workload and stress in carrying out daily tasks or a permanent connectivity that made it more difficult to combine with family time, for instance. Problems caused by a “literal” change of the timetable from the classroom to the screen, which was not feasible for a society that was confined to their homes from day to day.

Directors and teachers worked for months following the school curriculum and adapting content to the new situation without a defined plan. However, how should distance education be approached? In order to promote the technological transformation of education and educational management in Spain, it was essential to implement platforms to assist management teams, teachers, students and educational authorities by means of Artificial Intelligence. Moreover, if the aim is to promote more personalised education in schools, the truth is that there is still much to do in the field of online education.

More technological training for teachers, socio-emotional support for students and a prioritisation of essential learning objectives within the curriculum were essential.

The management teams promoted measures in their senates in order to achieve an advance planning of the session, to adapt the assessment to the individual context or to generate more feedback with students by using open forums or via email so that they accompany and attend to the individual doubts of each student. They guided the redesign of the course through the elaboration of activities with didactic resources that helped the students not only to solve them by themselves, but also to create dynamics of active interaction using tools that encourage collaborative work, amongst other activities. A real challenge.

Online teaching required a set of resources to ensure that teachers were accompanying students throughout their teaching-learning process. And also that they could rely on adequate support, necessary experience and preparation to provide quality resources. Likewise, teamwork among teachers and a solid and pedagogical educational model were needed.

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The situation caused by COVID-19 has exposed many educational institutions without an emergency protocol for the continuity of online teaching. Therefore, it has shown a lack of digital competence on the part of not only some teachers but also directors. It was found that most of them are not digitally competent; in many cases, they only control the tools they use on a daily basis. Some of them are not even proficient in such common tasks as sending formal emails, participating in discussion forums or producing documents in word processors.

Depending on the decisions taken by management teams, administrations, faculties and the means available to each educational establishment, different strategies were instituted facing the suspension of face-to-face classes. There was schools that gave online classes, but also other schools where the teachers prepared homework to be submitted via email or instant messaging by parents or relatives once they were finished.

Challenges in terms of the educational administration on which the teacher depends: if they work for a public institution, they must follow the instructions given by the administration. That means, depending on the autonomous community, the ministry provided teachers with different tools.

Challenges in terms of the school faculty: choice of suitable tools depending on the specific context, students, available means, educational levels, digital competence of teachers, students and families. On the other hand, educational strategies to be implemented should be agreed upon, and also teacher training needs, planning of tasks to be carried out by students in order to avoid excessive homework, communication with families, adapting evaluation criteria, etc.

Challenges in terms of student privacy: seek a balance between not harming our students at the educational level, and also not doing so at the data privacy level. Digital tools should be reviewed before they are introduced in the classroom. It is very important that we check privacy policies.

Common guidelines for teaching were established once the needs had been identified and the strategies to be followed at the collective level had been established, and the choice of tools to be used had been finalised. An example of this was to put in place agreements for such basic aspects as:

- Plan the session in advance, being clear about the structure to be followed during the session.
- Mute the students' microphones by default. They will only open them during their specific interventions.
- Record the session. On the one hand, this offers the possibility of visualisation to students who may have experienced technical or other problems; on the other

hand, this allows students to review some points from the session in order to understand it in a better way in case they need it.

- Take advantage of screen sharing option. This makes it possible to show what teachers are seeing during their explanation, to make tutorials, to check homework, to project videos or even to allow students to make presentations by sharing their own screen.
- Diverse student participation, placing them in different roles: listening, reading, watching, speaking, playing and working, sometimes individually and sometimes collaboratively. In this way, teachers will be able to keep their attention during most of the session.
- It is a very positive fact to create a debate, but it is important to take turns to speak.
- The materials used should ensure the active participation of learners.

Feedback gains special relevance, whether interactive, by intervening during the session, or post-active, generally through open forums or via instant messaging/email for individual cases. Evaluation should be adapted to the particular and realistic context in which we live. This is a great opportunity to put into practice authentic evaluation, which rewards the process and the acquisition of competencies. It is also worth pointing out that, on one hand, teachers and management teams should continue using digital and conventional classroom and school management tools to ensure the proper functioning and education in times of pandemic.

The digitisation of schools was revealed as a partial and insufficient process, more linked to reinforcing face-to-face attendance than to expanding learning beyond the classroom. In that regard, it can be affirmed now that the ambiguous, hesitant and conservative approach of the administration (and part of the faculty) in relation to a true digital education has definitely collapsed. The reason of this is that it has led to many schools and teachers having to resort hastily to platforms and services that they had used only superficially or in a limited way, while there is a lack of knowledge about what resources are available to students and their families at their home.

Recovering the essence of teaching work and putting pedagogical common sense to work in the face of this unexpected exceptional situation was one of the great challenges for directors and teachers. In this sense, some keys to “confined” teaching were necessary:

The information and tasks provided had to be “rationed”: little but in a good quality is better than too much and in a poor quality. It was essential to focus on the key concepts to be taught and to provide a variety of ways to access that knowledge. The instructions to be given must be clear and comprehensive: our students do not have teachers on their side to ask questions and many families may not be able to help their children for various (and sometimes painful) reasons. So important is the activity that teachers entrust as the response that they give to these activities: in addition to feedback as a teacher, which is



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absolutely necessary, it is appropriate to use self-evaluating activities and also peer review, two interesting tools now and when they get back to the classroom.



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