ONLINE EDUCATION – IMPROVISATION OR INNOVATION

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Abstract

Online education has been widely available since the internet started to play an important part in everybody's life and its benefits for all stakeholders are unquestionable. Since the pandemic struck, online education has become the watchword for an audience wider than the one envisaged before, as, at all levels, be they primary, secondary or tertiary, teachers, students and parents have pinned all their hopes on it, expecting it to be the appropriate solution, so that educational standards could be kept at least at a minimum/ satisfactory level. But, were they ready to turn to this somewhat new teaching and learning paradigm? Did they have the necessary digital skills? Could they successfully adapt to a whole new approach? Considering that online teaching has been more or less exclusive in most parts in Romania for the last two semesters in primary and secondary education, our paper aims to tentatively answer these questions from the teachers' perspective, by pointing to both the positive and negative aspects entailed by this unforeseen situation which does not seem to end any time too soon. Even if our investigation is limited to a relatively small number of primary and secondary school educators from only one county of Romania, our conclusions might shed some light on the challenges that these specific actors have had to deal with so far, given the circumstances. Moreover, we might also be able to indicate whether the balance was tipped in favour of improvisation or innovation for those willing to participate in our survey.

Keywords: *online education, primary and secondary education in Romania, teachers, digital competences.*

Introduction

Approaching education by exclusively using digital devices and an internet connection has become the only way possible to ensure participation in the teaching learning process in Romania, starting with March 2020. The entire student population enrolled in primary, secondary or tertiary education in Romania, as well as the teaching and management staff, not to mention parents, had to quickly internalize the requirements of the new educational paradigm so that satisfactory results could be achieved. This sudden change has made considerable demands on all stakeholders, be they financial, technical or psychological, and the gap between those situated at the high and low ends of the educational continuum has unfortunately deepened.

Continuing to build up the key competences in students, especially those in primary and lower secondary education, was put to a hold or significantly slowed down when the lockdown measures came into force in Romania, in March 2020. No overnight miraculous solutions could be envisaged so that the educational objectives set for the 2019-2020 school year could still be attained. It was the more difficult as nobody could roughly estimate how long the pandemic was going to last/ when the pandemic might possibly come to an end.

Under these circumstances, this paper aims at investigating whether Romanian teachers were able to adapt or change their teaching abilities so that curricular objectives could be partially or totally met. In point of structure, the first part of our paper provides a diachronic perspective on the regulations put forward by the Romanian Ministry of Education regarding online education in the primary and secondary educational system, during March 2020 – January 2021. In part two, we give a brief outline of the recent reports on online education published by Romanian education specialists, giving special attention to the teachers' opinion. Part three covers the methodology employed in our study and in part four we discuss the findings of our small-scale research. The final part deals with the conclusions of our investigation.

Online Teaching Regulations in Romania: March 2020 – January 2021

Regular school activities were suspended starting with March 11, 2020, as a result of the Decree no. 195[5] of March 16, 2020 regarding the establishment of the state of emergency on the Romanian territory and the Decision of the National Committee for Special Emergency Situations no. 6[6] of March 9, 2020. Taken by surprise, Romanian education stakeholders expected that the unperformed activity (for 8 working days) would be recovered in the near future, when activities were to be resumed, very similar to previous situations that had existed (caused by strikes, unfavorable weather conditions, etc.).

On March 9 and 10, the Romanian Ministry of Education (RME) made their first recommendations, underlying the fact that the guidelines provided were not meant to replace the activities that used to be performed in schools on a regular basis. The official document included the following:

• the necessity to create technology-assisted resources (RME Notice no. 79 / 10.03.2020, to the county school inspectorates);

• teachers were recommended to access the educational applications offered under free licence by Google and Microsoft, being indicated that they would get support from the Teaching Staff Resource Centers[7] and e-learning experts within the CRED project[8];

• teachers were suggested that they could keep in touch with their students through any means of communication;

• the schools' boards of directors were to decide how suspended educational activities could be recovered.

• This endeavour could be interpreted as an attempt to create a framework to regulate educators' activity in the short term. Moreover, the solution envisaged by the Romanian educational authorities, at that point, was the recovery of the classes.

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[5] Published in the Official Gazette of Romania no. 212 of 16 March 2020 (Chapter VII - Other measures, Article 49: 'During the state of emergency, activities in all educational units and institutions are suspended.').
[6] Art. 1 specifies the suspension of courses in state and private pre-university education units for the period March 11-March 22, 2020, with the possibility of extending this period, depending on the evolution of the situation.
[7] Each county in Romania has such an institution.
[8] An Romanian educational project, co-financed by the European Social Fund.

On March 18, RME came back with more clarifications (RME Notice no. 8731 / 18.03.2020), requesting the county school inspectorates to analyze alternative solutions for continuing online education. Thus, the suspension of the regular teaching activities until further notice was anticipated and the RME evinced their concern to support students and teachers in the efficient use of tools and educational applications useful for distance learning, along with their planning of training teachers (made by experts of the CRED project, underway at the onset of the pandemic) between March 19-25.

On March 30, the RME addressed an open letter to teachers, mentioning that:

– the Ministry was aware that there were students and teachers who did not have the necessary technology to continue the teaching-learning process;

– the Ministry encouraged teaching and learning, creating educational context through any means of communication, using any available resources to motivate students to stay connected to education;

– the Ministry announced the identification of digital tools and resources, grouped on the DIGITAL educred.ro platform[9];

– activities (revisions) meant to reinforce already acquired competences are suggested (therefore no teaching and assessment activities are to be performed);

– the Ministry urged teachers to keep a balance in the volume of resources transmitted, so that individual activity and participation in online activities would not be a pressure for students;

– the Ministry stated that they were working on scenarios to compensate for the effects of the crisis.

The following months (until the end of the 2019-2020 school year) were also under the sign of improvisation from the point of view of the actual organization of the educational activities. In this period, the regulations put forth by the RME focused on the administrative part: the management of the student records, the organization of national exams.

As the beginning of the new 2020-2021 school year was approaching, clear specifications were necessary, so new RME orders were issued (RME Order no. 5447 /

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[9] The same CRED project, aforementioned in this paper.

31.08.2020 on the *Approval of the Framework Regulation for the Organization and Functioning of Pre-University Education Units*; RME Order no. 5545 / 10.09.2020, on the *Approval of the Framework Methodology regarding the Organisation of Teaching Activities through Technology and the Internet, and the Processing of Personal Data*). Thus, by means of these regulations, it was indicated that various educational activities could be carried out online, by electronic means of communication (videoconferencing), whenever objective circumstances (such as the pandemic) can be identified. The latter RME order produced badly needed clarifications for the first time since online education became the watchword:

– the list of terms associated with online teaching and their definitions (teaching activity through technology and the internet; virtual educational environment; digital educational platforms to be used for the teaching/learning process or necessary to create and share open educational resources, applications for communication through technology and the internet, digital resources; forms of communication through technology and the internet – synchronous, asynchronous, mixed);

– the applicable principles, as well as the aspects regarding security in the virtual educational environment and the management of personal data;

– the stages of implementation of the teaching-learning activities through technology and the internet, at the level of educational units;

– the specific roles of the stakeholders involved in organizing and carrying out teaching activities for learning through technology and the internet (ministry, school inspectorates, management of educational units, teachers, students, parents),

– the methodological aspects on organizing and carrying out teaching activities through technology and the internet in pre-university education units,

– how to carry out teaching activities in disadvantaged communities where teachers and students have limited access to technology.

Based on the methodology put forth by the RME, the schools developed their own procedures regarding the teaching activities performed through technology and the internet, as well as for the processing of personal data.

Approved just a few days before the start of the 2020-2021 school year, on September 14, the *Framework Methodology for Organizing Teaching Activities through Technology and*

the Internet, and the Processing of Personal Data was a first step towards normality, considering the period we were going through: the normality of the online school/ education. It is hard to believe that schools had the necessary respite to carry out the necessary procedures, to make the necessary acquisitions, to instruct the teachers and students, etc. However, the gains this official document brought on were significant, because it created a framework in which online activity could grow. Starting with this moment, the schools proceeded to activate their licence for a free platform within the RME partnership with Google and Microsoft, to create personalized accounts (on the school domain) for all the teachers and for all the students, thus having the possibility to benefit from a free service for online activities.

This *Framework Methodology* also shed some light on the most difficult problem to solve: ensuring the necessary resources for students. Art 11 included, among the competences / obligations of the management of the educational units, the necessity to ask the local authorities to ensure the proper digital devices as well as the internet connection for the preschoolers / students who did not have the necessary means to carry out the activities through technology and the internet; the distribution of devices connected to the internet, to preschoolers / students who did not have these means (art. 11, paras d, f)), by concluding a loan agreement. The obligation of school units to provide resources for students was also included in subsequent regulations (RME Order No. 5972/2020 of 8.11.2020 and RME Order No. 3090 of 8.01.2021, both regarding the suspension of activities that involved the physical presence of preschoolers and students in the units of pre-university education): the county school inspectorates / the school inspectorate of Bucharest and the pre-university education units had the obligation to provide educational resources for students who did not have access to information technology and the internet.

We could not overlook that this obligation did not include teachers as well. Nothing was mentioned about teachers who did not have access to technology / internet. We do not know the exact situation at this point, but there are still students without the necessary technical means and most teachers use their personal resources. The issue of teachers' competences to carry out online activities appropriately also remains open; it is an issue that our investigation is trying to throw some light on.

Recent Online Education Reports in Romania: A Brief Overview

Shortly after students and teachers stopped their regular activities, Romanian education specialists grasped this wholly new research opportunity and started investigating it. Two reports were published, one in May 2020 and the other one in August 2020, both of them trying to evaluate the new teaching and learning paradigm, as knowledge of the situation could offer valuable insight to all stakeholders.

Even if they share a common goal, the differences between these research projects are obvious: the May report focuses exclusively on the teachers and their (in)ability to deal with the sudden change which occurred in March (the survey was made available between March, 25-31), whereas the August report considers the multiple stakeholders involved in the educational process for the rest of the second semester (the respondents could participate in this survey between May, 27 – June, 12). Moreover, the research teams are also different: behind the May report there is a team of academics from several Romanian universities (Bucharest, Iași, Cluj, Timișoara), accompanied by two researchers from the Romanian Institute for Education and one online education specialist; the August report was ordered by the RME and is the product of the Romanian Institute for Education. No other information is available to identify the actual researchers involved in this project – we could assume that one of the departments within this research institution initiated and coordinated the project, and, subsequently, drafted the report. In addition to that, the samplings differ as well: only 6436 teachers participated in the March survey vs. 6166 principals, 65309 teachers, 219073 students and 316492 parents, who took part in the other survey. So, in point of representativeness, obviously, the August report supersedes the one from May; due to the resources the Romanian Institute for Education has at its disposal, as the institution coordinating education related research at national level, the access to those participants willing to share their opinion on the topic of online education was easier to get.

As far as the teachers' digital skills are concerned, the May report concludes that most teachers have or should have these skills because the RME and its subordinate institutions have either promoted or set up various programmes that have helped them acquire the necessary skills. Nevertheless, the report also points to the fact that the Romanian

educational system was not fully prepared to welcome such a change (despite having digital skills, the teaching staff might lack skills necessary for computer-assisted teaching) and, what is more important, the curriculum was not designed in such a way to allow exclusive online teaching. In addition to that, apart from the pedagogical barriers (no curriculum planning skills for online education; no skills for developing digital learning resources; the difficulty to motivate students and keep them interested in an online educational environment), there were also technical obstacles (poor internet connection, difficult access to students' personal email addresses / no access to digital platforms, inappropriate digital devices, scarce digital resources) that teachers had to deal with. Therefore, according to the May report, in order to be successful in their new endeavour, teachers had to exhibit specific qualities: availability, interest, pedagogical skillfulness and inventivity.

The May report indirectly identifies the problems that students had (from their teachers' perspective). Thus, students had to overcome technical obstacles (no/ poor internet connection; improper digital devices; multiple platforms/ communication channels used by their teachers), become used to online learning (recalibrate their digital competence, attuning it for learning, not entertaining purposes), reach a higher level of autonomy in learning (at the end of March 2020 regular teaching activities were either missing or scarce, so teacher monitoring was no longer in place and there was no real possibility to cover the educational content in a structured manner) or rely on adult/parent support. Under these circumstances, the report makes an ominous prediction: the gap between good/average students and weak/poor students will be on the rise.

Considering that online education is unlikely to end soon, the May report suggests that 'the Romanian curriculum should be reorganized, as well as the manner in which computer assisted activities are delivered, monitored, promoted and rewarded' (p. 50). From this perspective, the report points to the importance of holding on to the long-term opportunity arisen in this context: internalizing the newly acquired digital tools, fully integrating them in the teaching-learning process, no matter the future educational settings (be they exclusively online, hybrid or face-to-face). Moreover, it is proposed that RME should develop a free access website for teachers, which is to include digital educational products and professional support. Also, it is recommended that the quality and relevance of continuous professional

development programs should be centrally stimulated and monitored. Given the unknown variables of the new educational situation, teachers are not only expected to be/become self responsible, inventive and exhibit courage when identifying proper solutions, but they should also trust their pedagogical competences and rely on them in order to successfully cope with the obstacles.

Considering the moment it was launched, the institution coordinating the research project and the impressive number of participants, the August report offers a comprehensive perspective on the online education unfolding in Romania, between March-June 2020. In point of the teachers' digital competence, this report reinforces the findings of the report published in May, 2020: having digital competence is usually understood as being able to use a computer/ digital devices and NOT as being able to identify/ develop open educational resources or use educational platforms/ applications (p.15). Thus, during the period covered by this research, many Romanian teachers needed help to carry out their activities and sometimes an ITC specialist indicated by the school principal provided the necessary guidance or, quite often, their more digitalized colleagues gave the badly needed support. What is more important, the teachers participating in the survey mentioned that some students (especially those in primary school) could not autonomously cope with the requirements specific to online education.

The August Report also pointed to both the obstacles that teachers had to overcome as well as to the positive outcomes of the new educational situation. Thus, among the difficulties encountered by the teachers, the report includes: no/ poor access to equipment (in some cases, no personal digital device or internet connection existed); more time allotted for the organization of online teaching activities (as compared to their usual routine before the pandemic); insufficient experience related to using digital resources/ tools/ applications; professional discomfort in interacting with their students via online platforms. As for the positive aspects related to online education that teachers could identify, the August Report lists the following: advanced/ enhanced digital competence for teachers (first teachers became capable of identifying appropriate learning resources and then they started creating alternative resources that they could further use in the traditional classroom, as well); better skills at adapting the curriculum to the students' needs (in this case, online education); more

parents offering support to their children; increased learning autonomy for students; more opportunities for teachers to exchange ideas, resources, experiences.

As for recommendations, the teachers who took part in the May-June survey mentioned that, unless traditional face-to-face education is possible (while fully complying with safety measures in force), then the hybrid scenario should be used (combining the traditional and the online systems of education) starting with the 2020-2021 school year. They also proposed that proper digital equipment as well as free internet connection should be made available for teachers and students, as well as schools; teachers should have free access to online educational platforms and resources (every school should decide on using a specific platform). In addition to that, teachers suggested that there should be more methodological guidelines as to the way in which the curricular content is to be covered (in the online scenario, the activities selected are expected to be more practical and interdisciplinary), as well as to the manner in which the assessment is to take place. As for further enhancing the digital competence, in the teachers' opinion, organizing continuous professional development might prove extremely valuable, with a special focus on the particular features of online teaching and learning. Moreover, very much in line with the May Report, this report also suggested that students digital abilities need to become more education-oriented, and thus be an effective tool in maintaining/ boosting their knowledge level.

In a nutshell, these reports offered a multifaceted view on the way in which online education unfolded in Romanian primary and secondary schools, from the start of the lockdown measures imposed by the government until almost the end of the school year. The conclusions of these reports helped the RME to consider possible scenarios for the 2020-2021 school year, as well as to start catering for the needs of all the stakeholders, be they material, technical or methodological.

Methodology

The hypothesis of our research is that teachers have the necessary skills / are able to adapt to achieve the objectives of education, transposed into the new paradigm – online education. In addition to that, we assume that this new paradigm might help teachers

overcome the initial stage of improvisation, providing them with the opportunity to head for a new stage, which could be referred to as didactic innovation.

The objectives of our research are:

– to confirm / deny the results of the research reports carried out in Romania during the online school period;

– to identify and emphasize the strengths, but also the shortcomings of online education, from the perspective of teachers.

To conduct our research we used document analysis (research reports, legislation that regulated the period discussed here), as well as a questionnaire-based survey. The questionnaire (created with Google Forms) was distributed online, reaching teachers through social networks (Facebook, WhatsApp) and several (7) principals of schools and high schools in Prahova County, who sent it by e-mail to school teachers . The questionnaire includes 14 items, one of which refers to identification data and categorisation criteria for our participants: the environment in which the school operates, the level of education at which it operates, the discipline taught / teaching specialization, teaching experience / seniority in education. The others items of the questionaire deal with information about the continuous training opportunities related the acquisition of competences compatible with online education (1 item) and 12 multiple choice items that aim at the level of teachers' agreement with: the statements regarding methodological aspects of online teaching and learning (6 items); the existence of technological barriers that teachers and students might encounter in online education (6 items).

The participation was voluntary; the answers we received indicated a group of 166 participating teachers. The group may seem small, but it covers the preschool, primary, lower and upper secondary levels of education, in rural and urban areas, as well as a wide range of specializations, with representatives from all curricular areas. Our subjects work in kindergartens, primary and middle schools, theoretical and technological high schools and have varied teaching experience: from beginners to teachers with over 20 years of experience. We note the high percentage of respondents having over 20 years of work experience (55.3%), to which is added 31.1% with over 11-20 years of work experience in the educational field. As a whole, the vast majority of our group has at least a decade of

teaching experience (enough time, for instance, to obtain teaching tenures). It remains to be seen whether the experience is a factor that facilitated teachers' swift attuning to the new approach of the educational process or, on the contrary, as a result of their constant exposure and limitation (in many cases) to classical teaching, it is a factor that blocked innovation.

Figure 1 – The school location of the survey participants
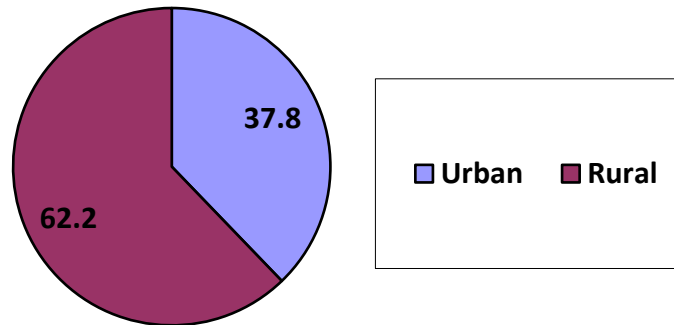
The variety in the group of subjects taking part in the survey gives weight to our conclusions. In addition to that, the area where the research was carried out brings extra validation for the results obtained, as Prahova is one of the counties with a higher standard of living than the Romanian average (which implies better endowment of schools, better preparation of teachers – through continuous training; there are several schools where online education could be carried out in decent conditions), so these respondents could express a well-informed opinion.

Figure 2 – The educational level in which the survey participants teach
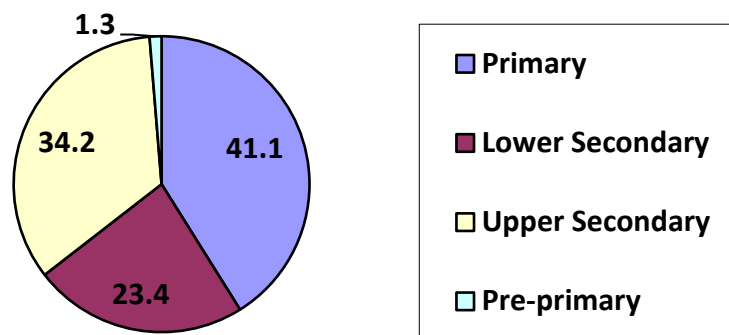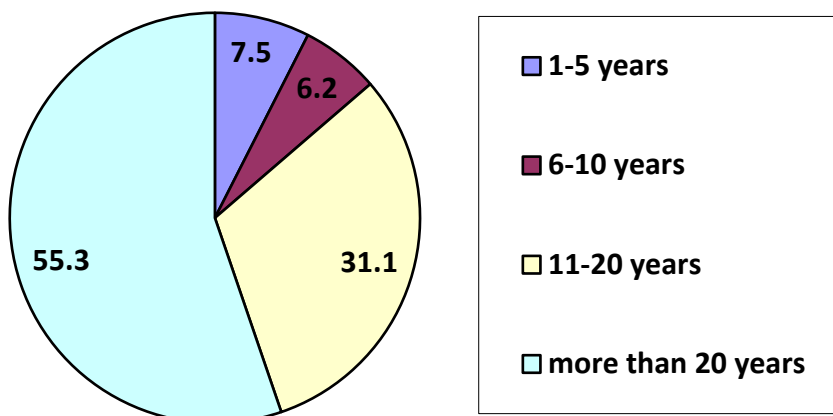
Figure 3 – The teaching experience of the survey participants

Besides these aspects, we are also aware of the limits of our research: the small group of subjects (the limit compensated by the great variety of their specialisations, as we aforementioned); the impossibility to check whether the subjects really belong to the targeted categories (teaching experience, specialization, level of education, etc.). Moreover, our research exclusively focuses on teachers, which could limit the overview of the problem (for a more comprehensive perspective we should have asked the opinion of the other educational actors – students, parents, managers at the central and local level of education). Nevertheless, we believe that teachers are the most valuable variable: they are the ones who deliver the curriculum (the same for everyone), and the way in which they do it is essential, because it is the way in which it comes to be reflected in their students' acquisitions / competences. Have the teachers in Romania been able to do this in a completely new way as compared to the one in which they had done it before? This is the question our paper seeks to tentatively answer.

Findings

Most of the teachers participating in the surveys from the previously analyzed research reports consider that they have the necessary digital skills; by digital skills it is meant the ability to use a computer or electronic device and not the ability to identify / develop open educational resources or use educational platforms / applications. 90% of those surveyed in March and May-June 2020 estimated that their ICT level was *good* and *excellent*, and 40% stated that they used ICT-based activities daily or almost daily. Both reports emphasized that

it was difficult to interpret these results, as it was not clear what it meant to have digital skills in teachers' case, from their own perspective. For a possible clarification, the question in our questionnaire regarding this aspect is more specific: *Have you participated in a training course / training program (online or face to face) to acquire the necessary skills to use the necessary applications (such as Microsoft Educator; Google Educator) to carry out the teaching activity in the online environment?* The answers provided by our respondents indicate an important percentage of the teachers who have acquired, through such a course, the necessary competences (73.5%) (Figure 4).

Figure 4 – Teachers' participating in a training course to acquire digital skills
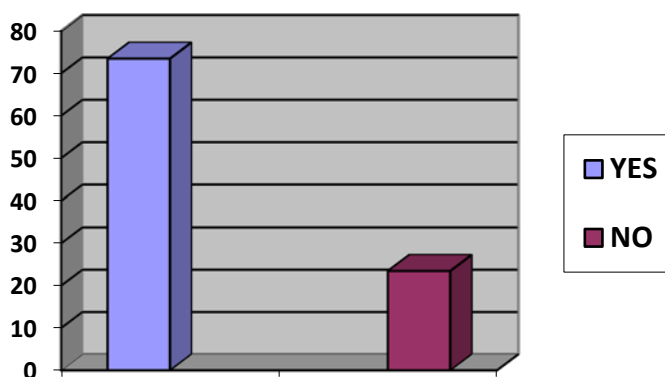

However, it is not easy to identify the teachers' own acceptance of the description of these competences, especially since, given the exceptional situation, most courses took place, mainly through the Teaching-Staff Resource Centres, after the onset of the pandemic, in an attempt to quickly ensure the much needed help, so that teachers could adapt their activities to the new situation. Our subjects seem to be aware of the shortcomings of such training (insufficient time allotted or failure to comply with the demands specific for the new educational context), as this is the inference that results from the answers they gave when asked about the existence of technological barriers (from their own point of view, as well as that of their students). Most teachers received training, but the skills acquired fail to overcome the barriers that (still) exist: 88.5% of subjects express their agreement and total

agreement about the existence of technological barriers for students in online learning, and 77.6 % consider that such obstacles characterize their online teaching activity, too.

According to the reports analyzed in the third part of this paper, the obstacles faced by the teachers referred to: difficulties in having access to quality equipment and internet necessary to carry out online activities with their students; more time dedicated to preparing and organizing online activities; insufficient development of the digital skills needed to use various online tools and applications; professional discomfort in interacting with students in online contexts. From the same perspective, that of the teachers participating in the March and May-June surveys, their students had to deal with: technical difficulties; not having the habit of learning/studying by means of new technologies; insufficient level of digital skills; lacking appropriate digital devices; lacking a well-structured program; lacking constant control and monitoring of their activity; limited internet access; lacking support / lacking interest / prohibitions from adults. Even if students have had access to information in digital format, they are not used to learning using digital tools (usually they have used / are using digital devices for fun). The answers of our survey respondents confirm the difficulties identified in the two reports: they even go further, as most consider that there are students, respectively teachers, incompatible with online education (Figure 5.)

Figure 5 – Students'/teachers' who are not compatible with online education
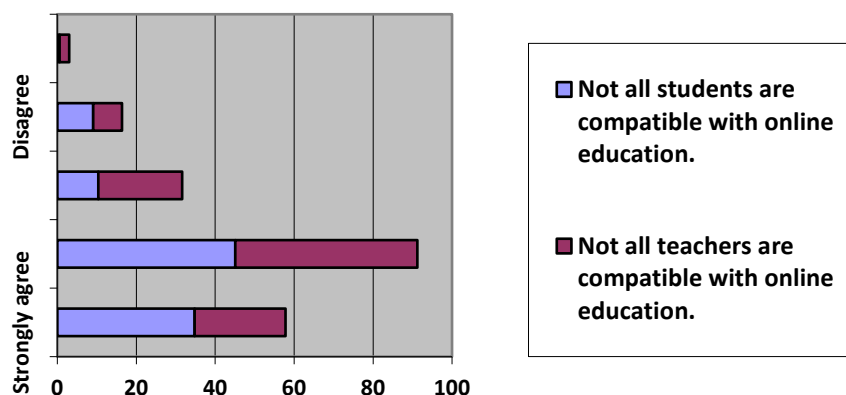
The opinion expressed by our survey participants raise important questions that cannot be neglected: *What happens to students who are incompatible with online education?*; *How will they catch up with the students who are compatible with online education?; What*

happens to the students of those teachers who are incompatible with online education?; How will these incompatible teachers make students form the competences targeted by the curriculum?; What results from the meeting between students incompatible with online education and teachers incompatible with online education? The possible answers cannot be encouraging. It is also necessary to analyze where this incompatibility comes from. In the case of students, is it due to: the particularities of age / level of education? the socio-economic context? In the case of teachers, is it due to: insufficient / inappropriate training? a rigidity of the methods used so far? out of routine, lack of flexibility and adaptation? And, further, we should also investigate what needs to be done for these incompatibilities to diminish / disappear, because, based on the experience gained during the pandemic, we do not know when / if / for how long online education will be an option, maybe the only option. We believe that these questions require definite answers, which could only be obtained through further detailed research.

The questions in our survey that targeted the teaching methodology to be used in online education bring into discussion various problematic aspects. The first concerns the time needed to carry out an efficient online activity. Teachers consider that online teaching (such as preparing materials in electronic format, creating new specific activities, learning the characteristics of the application used / using the application, electronic correspondence, assessment) is much more time-consuming than classical teaching; the level of agreement is extremely high: 61.4% of our survey participants express their total agreement with this statement (*Teaching takes more time online*) and along with another 29.5% who express their agreement represent a total that exceeds 90%. It turns out that only a little over 9% of our survey participants did not need more time than before to carry out their teaching activities.

Regarding students and online learning, things are a little different, according to our respondents; their answers are differently distributed: 53.4%, that is a little over half of the group, expresses their total agreement (17.6%) or agreement (35.8%) with the statement *Doing homework and participating in online activities take students more time as compared to the previous situation*. 21.8% of the teachers articipating in the survey adopt a neutral

position, and the others, 24.8%, do not consider that students need more time, expressing their disagreement or total disagreement with this statement.

Comparing the opinions about the time needed for teachers to prepare and conduct their teaching activities with the time needed by students to deal with online learning (in their teachers' view), it turns out that teachers' activity is more demanding in terms of the time required – almost unanimous opinion. Therefore, one could infer that our respondents believe that the burden for online teaching and learning lies with them, the teachers.

One of the difficulties that teachers have to deal with refers to the selection of the tools to be used in teaching process. *There are a lot of tools that can be used in online teaching, but they are not always necessary* (*not everything that impresses us is necessary*) is the statement against which the surveyed teachers were invited to express their agreement. The answers are, again, homogeneous. Only 4.35 of the teachers express their disagreement (the percentage of total disagreement is 0) and only 12.8% prefer the neutral option. The rest, 83%, consider that, given the wide variety of available digital tools, the selection of those that are really useful represents the big challenge (Figure 6).

Figure 6 – Teachers' opinion on the usefulness of digital tools available

☐ There are a lot of tools that can be used in online teaching, but they are not always necessary (not everything that impresses us is necessary).
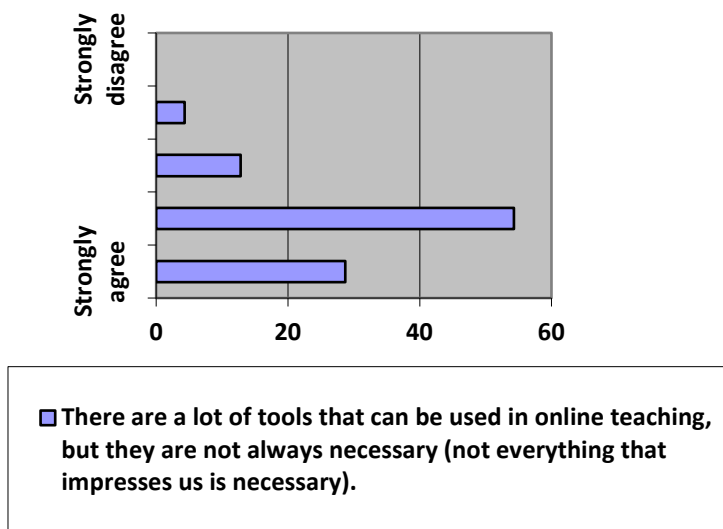
The difficulty to maintain students' interest is increasing in the case of online education, indicate the two reports sumarised in part three of this paper. This difficulty also

emerges from the answers of the teachers participating in our survey, who specify that *students appreciate the prompt answers they receive from teachers regarding their evolution in the online learning system*, and that, as compared to the educational paradigm used before the pandemic, students feel more the need for constant feedback (Figure 7) to guide them and help them continue. 67.75% of the respondents agree with this aspect, while only 3.6% do not consider that the constant appreciation of their students' activity is useful for maintaining their interest alive in the online teaching and learning process.

Figure 7 – Students' need for feedback

■ Students appreciate the prompt answers they receive from teachers regarding their evolution in the online learning system.
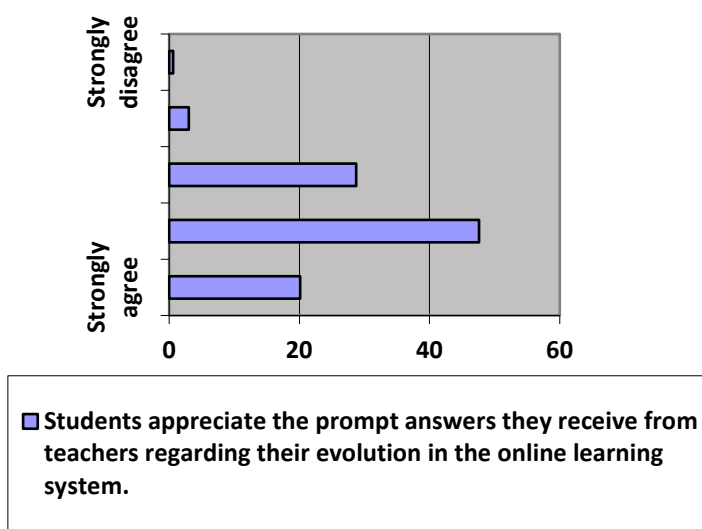
Developing and maintaining students' motivation for learning is an important and difficult task for teachers, whatever the conditions of the educational process, especially in the new context characterized by so many unknown variables. In proportion of 78.7% (agree and strongly agree), our respondents find that students need more extrinsic motivation (grading the tasks that students accomplish), which shows that online education is still in its infancy. Teachers are expected to identify those strategies that support and increase their students' motivation for learning, so that students could ultimately reach the next level, that of intrinsic motivation, which is an absolutely necessary step for them becoming autonomous in learning.

Figure 8 - Students' need for extrinsic motivation
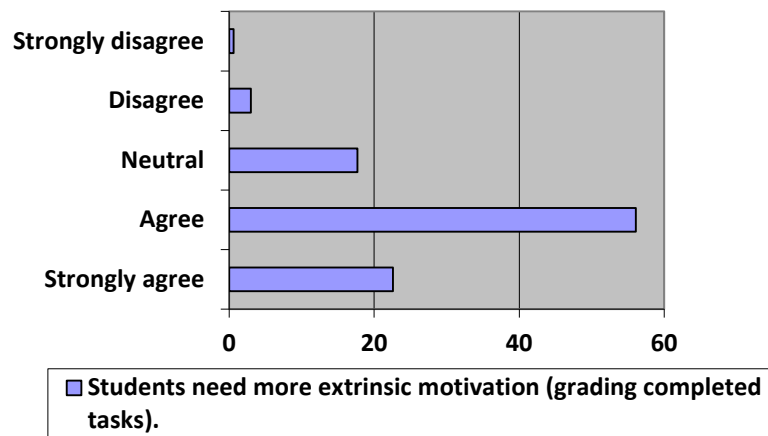
In the same context, related to increasing students' motivation and autonomy for learning, the pace of the proposed activities is also important. In a broad consensus (38.4% strongly agree and 54.3% agree), the teachers participating in our investigation deem that setting clear deadlines for completing tasks / homework assigned to students are useful.

Even if online education has existed for several decades, there is still so much to find out about it, since the targeted audience encompasses the whole school population at this moment. Not only the conclusions of the recent reports mentioned in our paper suggest that investigations should continue, but also the teachers participating in our small scale survey. There is a need for in-depth research to identify what works and what does not in online education. To check this assumption we asked our respondents' opinion. 92% agreed and strongly agreed that *we need to ask our students what works and what doesn't in online education.* To an even greater extent (98.2% agree and strongly agree), the survey participants would highly value the opinion of their fellow teachers on what is to be kept and what is to be disposed of, when it comes to online education, given that personal experience has now become a reality.

Figure 9 – Students' and teachers' need for in/validating the strengths ans weaknesses of online education

Legend:
- ☐ We need to ask our students what works and what doesn't in online education.
- ■ We need to ask the teachers what works and what doesn't in online education.
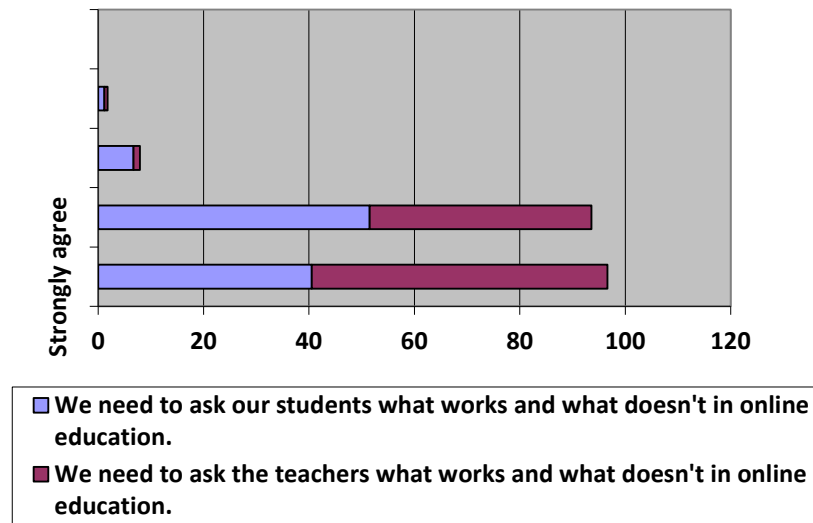
Conclusions

Before the pandemic started, in Romania, innovation in education meant digitalization. It was thought that using digital resources in the teaching-learning process, better, quicker, durable acquisitions could result. Now, as we were forced to undergo this process of digitalization almost overnight and online education has assigned us specific roles that we cannot reject (e.g. digital teacher, digital student, digital parent), because we would otherwise be left behind, we come to realize that digitalization brings along both strengths and weaknesses. As our findings show, even if the teachers may not have been prepared to respond to the challenges of the new educational paradigm, they somehow succeeded in overcoming some of the obstacles, by enhancing their digital competences and adapting their teaching approaches to suit the new circumstances, so that they could make the best of it for the sake of their students. How teachers concretely succeeded in overcoming these obstacles, the exact circumstances and variables which allowed teachers to adapt to the requirements of online education are to be closely investigated in further research, be they ours or other researchers interested in this topic, because there is no doubt that a lot of papers will attempt to dissect the multifaceted 'forced reform' that has characterized worldwide educational systems during this ongoing pandemic, pinpointing to its positive or negative, long or short-term implications.

Not only the May and August reports, but also our small scale investigation indicated both the drawbacks and the benefits associated with the new educational paradigm that has become dominant since the pandemic started. On the one hand, online education may have a negative impact on young and very young students who lack self-discipline and autonomy in learning. In addition to that, group/pair work is not achievable during online classes on all major applications used and thus one of the good features of face to face education cannot be transferred into the new educational context. Moreover, students' passivity is more difficult to control or question, as they may not want to turn on their camera and mike to fully participate in the activities, or they may not have the proper digital device and/or good quality internet access to do this. Also, the danger of becoming totally dependent on technology for satisfying socializing needs from a very young age has never been more serious and the pressure to resist the temptations that internet-connected devices might entail requires a lot of will and determination that many students might not have. Thus, under these wholly new circumstances, teachers have found themselves in a difficult position, as they are supposed to choose from an almost limitless variety of resources to meet possibly ever-more demanding students.

Our small scale research not only has confirmed the shortcomings associated with online education (evinced by the reports we analysed), which started in March 2020 as an improvisation, as the only possible solution at that time, but it has also pointed to other weaknesses. Our findings have prompted us to ask further questions for which proper answers are urgently needed. We would like to tentatively suggest that these answers might provide the necessary hints to what should be discarded, and, more importantly, to what should be kept and permanently integrated in the teaching learning process from now on; we strongly believe that not being able to make the most of the positive experiences and good practices (that is what proved to be useful and could facilitate teaching and learning in the future) would mean that we have pointlessly gone through an unprecedentedly difficult period and that the efforts made by all stakeholders have been in vain.

Even if further thorough investigations are necessary, at this point, it is important to keep in mind that online education has undoubtedly brought along significant advantages that could definitely boost the quality of the teaching-learning process when schools resume

their regular schedule, as teachers and students would be able to turn their digital educational experience to good account. Capitalizing on the strong points of online education (flexibility, possibility to cater for various learning needs, no time dedicated to commuting, direct access to activities organized by the teacher etc.) could represent a long-awaited step forward for the Romanian educational system, which has constantly received criticisms from all stakeholders.

We are very much aware of the limits of our paper and, consequently, our attempt should be viewed as the first step towards analyzing a major problem that education has suddenly and unexpectedly had to cope with. We deliberately confined ourselves to the Romanian experience, considering no other experiences from abroad, so that we could get to the bottom of the problem and subsequently find appropriate ways to approach and deal with it, as this might be a useful endeavour when the time comes to extract the benefits and eliminate the risks evinced by the 'forced reform' that we have been experiencing for a year now.

When it comes to any educational reform, resistance to change is usually one of the major difficulties one has to deal with, which may significantly reduce the chances for success. Given the special features of this 'forced reform', teachers may have exhibited some resistance to change at the beginning, but as online education has continued without any definite indication of its eventual ending, they have embraced the new educational paradigm, turning their teaching methods and strategies around so that curricular objectives could be met. Even though online education started under the bleak auspices of improvisation, the experience gained by teachers is considerable and may prove extremely valuable on the long term. Teachers have definitely acquired new competences and these could represent the onset of innovation, as, at this moment, all premises exist for the traditional approaches to education to harmoniously and inextricably interwine with digitally led ones. From this perspective, we might conclude that there are reasonable chances for Romanian education to somehow leave behind the gloomy past and open the door to a promising future.

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