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Educational Resilience in Pandemic Times and Potential Impacts on Inequalities: the Case of Romania

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Abstract: Coronavirus pandemic has affected millions of participants to education around the globe. School closure has been in the core of the preventive measures taken by authorities in order to limit COVID-19 spread. Resilience of the education systems in front of coronavirus crisis has relied on their capacity to continue education after the school closure. Home-schooling quickly has become a solution for many students. New tools of virtual education are being used by numerous teachers and students. The changes and shifts in education approach were more rapid and significant in pandemic times as ever. Education systems around the world have faced an unprecedented disruption. This paper argues that while the resilience of the education systems has relied extensively on virtual solutions, socio-economic disparities and digital gaps could widen educational inequalities. Statistical data are presented in order to shed light on the potential impacts on educational equality in times of COVID-19 pandemic. A more coherent and rapid response of educational authorities is required in Romania in order to tackle such effects.

Keywords: *Coronavirus; resilience; virtual education; impact; educational inequalities.*

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1. Introduction

Coronavirus pandemic determined one of the most important crisis of the modern times. Health sector has been exposed to an intense pressure due to high numbers of infections. Other sectors such as tourism, restaurants and commerce have suffered losses in terms of companies and jobs as a result of social distancing measures and demand reduction. The education sector has also suffered from an important disruption due to temporally closure of the education institutions.

At the end of March 2020, UNESCO (n.d.) has estimated that 91% of total enrolled learners used to learn in educational institutions that have been closed. All levels of education have been impacted. According to international and national organizations, the resilience of the education systems in front of coronavirus crisis has relied on their capacity to continue education after the school closure. Home-schooling quickly has become a solution for a wide-variety of students. Such approach has been generally implemented via virtual solutions supporting education.

This major shift towards virtual education can bring mixed effects. On the one hand, it can determine an emergence of educational innovation fueled by the virtualization of learning. On the other hand, due to digital gaps, the inequality in educational quality will further widen. The present paper argues that while the continuing education by home has relied extensively on virtual solutions, digital gaps could widen educational inequalities.

2. Educational resilience via virtual solutions

Coronavirus pandemic determined school closure for a record number of students in pre-primary, primary, secondary, post-secondary and tertiary education. According to UNESCO (n.d.), 138 countries have closed schools nationwide and further 11 countries have decided localized school closures in March 2020. Decisions of school closures have been taken in order to limit the COVID-19 spread and to alleviate the pressure put on the health care systems.`

Still, while school closures have been an effective measure from the public health point of view, it will determine long-term effects especially for the most vulnerable and marginalized.

Resilience of the educational systems has been manifested by the fact that schools have started to provide online learning opportunities. The solutions varied from virtual classes to lessons and assignments delivered via WhatsApp or email. As traditional education is no longer available for an

important number of students, educational resilience is strongly influenced by capacity of students to access the new educational opportunities that are available for them.

Transition of classes in online leave behind a number of students due to their low digital skills or costs of digital devices or internet. Access to education is more influenced by the access to new technologies as ever before. School closures affect vulnerable students disproportionately and preexisting disparities can be widen (GEM Report, 2020).

Family support has become more important for educational achievement in the context of home-schooling. The influence of conditions at home and educational attainment of parents on educational achievements of students could increase in pandemic times.

3. Socio-economic disparities and digital gaps in Romania

In situation of home-schooling, living conditions at home become more important factors influencing education of the students. Romania registers the highest severe housing deprivation rate among families with children among EU countries. In fact, the proportion of households with children suffering from severe housing deprivation is over ten percentage points higher than for the general population in Romania. Moreover, Romania is among countries registering highest level of housing overcrowding (European Commission, 2020).

Table 1. Individuals who have basic or above basic overall digital skills in 2019 (%)

	EU 28	Romania
All Individuals	58	31
16 to 19 years old	83	57
No or low formal education	31	18
Income in first quartile	41	15
Rural areas	49	23

Source: Eurostat (2020)

Additionally, access to online education is influenced by digital skills of students and their families. Level of digital skills in Romania is much lower than the EU average for both the entire population and young people. Also, there are important digital gaps affecting individuals with no and low formal education, individuals living in low income households and individuals from rural areas. It means that these socio-economic groups lack the skills needed for supporting online education of their children. On the

other hand, regional disparities in terms of internet use has increased in the last decade in Romania, leading to differentiated access to opportunities (Balacescu & Babucea, 2018; Ştefăniţă & Ivan, 2018). Romania is characterized by a so-called second-level digital divide given by available access to internet, high usage, but important disparities in opportunities taken online and digital skills (Barbovschi & Balea, 2013).

Equity in education refers to the fact that variation in education outcomes should not be related to students' background or socio-economic conditions. Romania is among countries registering within schools variation below the OECD average and between schools variation above OECD average in reading performance. Moreover, in Romania, variation explained by students' socio-economic status did not improve over PISA cycles in any of the assessed cognitive domains (OECD, 2018a).

Data from 2018 PISA (OECD, 2018b) show that the percentage of Romanian students with access to a computer for schoolwork is below the OECD average. Moreover, Romania displays a high level of inequality as the share of students from advantaged schools with access to a computer is above 95%, while among students from disadvantaged schools is around 75% (OECD, 2018b).

4. On the potential impacts on equal opportunities in Romania

During COVID-19 crisis, Romanian educational authorities haven't provide a coherent vision or common guidelines for home-schooling. First, teachers have been encouraged to continue education via virtual solutions and to collect "proofs" of educational activities. Following the position of various stakeholders showing disparities in the access to virtual learning, authorities have communicated that online learning is not mandatory for students and it will not replace formal educational courses. A month after the official moment of school closure, the central authorities have declared the intent to issue a regulation in the field of online learning.

In this unclear context, educational approach and concrete actions applied during pandemic crisis in Romania display huge variations and differences across schools, communities, levels of education, subjects and teachers. They vary from online courses supported by virtual platforms to TV programs for final exams or school assignments communicated by WhatsApp or email. Besides these actions, for many students education stopped once the schools have been closed.

In March 2020, the National Council of Students carried out a public consultation among 11.958 Romanian students showing that most of the

students have experienced online learning in the field of language (74.2%), mathematics (62.1%) and foreign languages (49.4%). 68.3% of respondents considered that methods of online learning are useful. However, only 55.1% of students say that all their class peers participate to the online courses.

5. Conclusions

Statistical data clearly show high incidence of severe housing deprivation affecting families with children in Romania, as well as high level of housing overcrowding. Such conditions are not favorable for home schooling. Additionally, digital gaps and preexisting educational inequalities further affect the access of vulnerable students to online education.

Concluding, while the transition of classes in online is beneficial for most of the students, it can magnify the existing inequalities by leaving behind students from disadvantaged environments or students with teachers unprepared for online education. In this context, a more coherent and rapid response of educational authorities is required in Romania in order to tackle such effects.

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