

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: QUESTIONS ABOUT EDUCATION AND ITS PROSPECTS

¹Veska Gyuvyiska, ²Nikolay Tsankov
¹South-West University "Neofit Rilski" (Bulgaria)
²Trakia University (Bulgaria)

Abstract. The text offers an education-related reading of the state of emergency in the Bulgarian society in the conditions of a pandemic. It touches upon the reasons for regression, but also the opportunities for radical transformation of Bulgarian education and its optimization in the future. The article examines the ethical issues teachers face in a time of societal crisis when various moral dilemmas are to be resolved. The scientific text discusses new ideas in the Bulgarian educational space, such as those for home education and family-type schooling. The article's set tasks include: (1) Pinpointing the problem of the pandemic as a typical educational problem; (2) Pointing out the educational resources related to limiting the social consequences of the pandemic; (3) Raising the question of teachers' ethical codes in times of Pandemic as a moral corrective for their professional conduct. The research is mainly related to the language of "philosophy of education" and its conceptual apparatus.

Keywords: pandemic; health and social crisis; education; ethical codes/ codes of conduct; educational resources; blended type of schooling; home schooling; optimization of education

Bulgarian society is implementing anti-epidemic measures, which means that the physical attendance in any educational activity is suspended in all schools, universities, and other educational institutions and organizations. The main recommendation in the sphere of education is, if possible, to introduce forms of distance schooling/learning.

The degree of uncertainty in the current situation related to the need for the timely introduction of distance e-learning in the various levels and stages of education is a distinctive feature of the crisis context. Without trying to specify the sociological, political, economic, etc. dimensions of the crisis, it must be said that it remains a state of critical instability associated with changes in the social environment, i.e. in educational environment, too and it has significant impact on the organizational mechanisms, the people involved, the technological solutions applied and on all remaining parameters of school life.

The state of undefined, unprecedented conditions in which the Ministry of Education and Science issues recommendations to educational institutions for organizing and conducting distance schooling, as well as the need to provide additional methodological and technical support for schools, teachers, students and parents are part of a new educational policy. The implementation of crisis plans for distance learning through the options of distance schooling requires urgent readjustment of the entire educational system. This poses a number of challenges to educators, which in turn leads to a sense of new solutions in terms of autonomy, leadership, monitoring and students' trust. The overall organizational culture in the pedagogical community is changing, which requires crisis management of cooperation, delegation of rights and coordination on various levels.

Schools are facing the need for a crisis management (the sense of threat, the element of surprise and the short time for reaction) as process in which organizations, educators, students and parents are challenged by factors that can vary unpredictably.

Main Social Issues in State of Emergency

“After the pandemic, the world will not be the same” is now the credo of the entire society. The pandemic, however, is a much more complex phenomenon than we could imagine. At first glance, the pandemic is a health problem that threatens the world and borders with the idea of destruction. The pandemic, as a bio-problem, creates new bio-ethics as well as a new bio-policy. The pandemic is also a social problem which society at this stage can hardly solve in terms of economy. The biggest secret, however, related to the pandemic, remains in the hands of the media and information networks of all kinds and nature which do not allow the whole truth to come out. Society itself is giving in to fear, insofar as the protection of life is also a matter of instinct. We are on the verge of a spiritual crisis that will certainly challenge or/and replace our values and will set precedents. Education is by no means removed from these processes, and the right measures to deal with the situation should be taken, as there is a danger of regression or radicalization in its messages.

The study has the following tasks: (1) To pinpoint the problem of the pandemic as an educational problem; (2) To point out educational resources related to limiting the social consequences of the pandemic; (3) To raise the question of the teachers' ethics code in time of Pandemic as a moral corrective for their professional conduct.

The Teacher's 'Hippocratic' Oath in a Pandemic

For the American physician Albert Jonsen, the creator of the new bioethics, Medical Ethics went through several stages: (1) The first stage, which began in the 4th-3rd centuries BC, was the Hippocratic Oath, which was to ‘manifest an inner virtue in the doctor's behavior’. (2) The second stage is the Ethics of Competence

defined by Dr. Richard Cabot (1869 – 1939) which focuses on the knowledge and skill of the physician, which in itself is a type of morality. Competence is more important than any social status and prestige, more important than the ritual actions of the community and more important than anything external to the profession itself. (3) The third stage is related to the humanization of the professional action of the physician, as in Cable's words, “we must deserve the affection of each sufferer, know his past and guide his future for the better” (Jonsen, 2003). The relation that Johnson brings to the development of medical ethics “clinical – competent – humanized” can also label other professional fields, such as pedagogy. There is often a gradual departure from the strictly professional in the activities of the specialist and redirection of all attention to the users of the service and their well-being. Of course, there is a significant difference in the teacher's behavior and his interaction with the students. Students are neither clients nor patients, although there are attempts to compare them to such in contexts of education as a service or psychoanalysis.

There are significantly more “sufferers” in and from education than expected, and not just during a pandemic. The leading motive for achievement in education and in particular learning is the will to succeed or the fear of failure of the student. As the success-failure relationship has moved on in the 21st century, the fear of failure can really hurt not only children. The whole process of socialization of the individual is a product of fear, a fear that is not innate but learned. ‘Fear regulated in rules and norms that discipline the individual in a group is no less a threat to one’s personality’ (Tsankov & Guviyska, 2018).

The main concern of teachers with regard to children and adolescents in a time of pandemic is first and foremost a concern for their soul, because the ones being educated have neither social experience nor character traits to withstand suggestions of fear or the radical reorganization of the education process. The preservation of the competencies of teachers or the options for their improvement in a digital environment are an important factor for the development of their professionalism. The humanization of the professional activities of the teachers during a pandemic must be a priority aimed at preventing all attempts to make children bear the heavy burden of a spiritual crisis which today is called a pandemic but tomorrow may simply change its name but not its essence.

Code of Ethics in State of Pandemic

In general, the Code of Medical Ethics, published in 1847 in America (revised in 1902, 1912, and 1957) acquired the status of the Ten Commandments in 1966 and includes principles such as: physicians should respect the rights of their patients, they should continuously improve their skills and adhere to the professional rules of conduct, they should consult with their colleagues when necessary, observe medical secrecy and be good citizens ” (Jonsen, 2003). The Teachers' Code of Conduct during a pandemic does not differ significantly from that of medics. It includes

respect for students' rights, professional development, collegiality and cooperation with other teachers in the professional community, respect for the students' family privacy, and socially acceptable behavior. The change of the learning schedule and the home schooling paradigm, as well as the new digital technologies that enter the personal space of the students and their family create good preconditions for this. The "good citizen" case deserves special attention as it is tied to information in the 21st century. It is very often that the society itself does not have all the reliable information, in this case about the pandemic. The opportunity to comment on the social situation can set precedents ranging from extreme liberalization to strict compliance, which young students may be able to appreciate, but not teenagers. The balance of reasonable thinking should be kept in the days of societal crisis in compliance with basic professional principles – teachers should become neither political speakers nor health workers.

Ethical principles in the behavior of teachers contain the arguments and grounds for the actions taken in the overall organization of the educational environment and the teaching designs. They rationalize the environment, outline the rules and indicate the possible ways to solve the educational tasks and the opportunities for full socialization of children. Awareness and observance of ethical principles is a prerequisite for the formation of modern, professional and ethical relationships in the pedagogical teams and parents and students.

The most common approach to ethics is to formulate general ethical principles that provide guidance on how to act in cyberspace and in pandemic conditions. Its main tasks are directly determined by the need to organize and structure the interaction in such a way as to achieve mutual coherence of goals and effective results for providing assistance and protection to students.

An important aspect of any professional field in medical, pedagogical or social terms is the respect of the rights of the subjects, regardless of the situation. Each professional community creates its own code of ethics. In cases of pedagogical work being carried out with students with special educational needs, it is imperative to observe ethical principles, so that the child's personality is respected and s/he is not negatively affected or neglected under any circumstances.

The question is whether children's rights, as the basis of ethics in pedagogical activity, as well as of any system of moral thinking, can be observed in a pandemic situation and a state of emergency. Children's rights can be specified in various definitions such as:

- (1) Respect the right to self-determination by providing the opportunity for independent choices and abiding by them, but only if it does not endanger the rights and legal interests of other people;
- (2) Granting the right to each person to participate in making decisions in their lives;
- (3) Providing thorough assistance to each person, i.e. examining the personality as a whole, and realizing all its aspects in life;

(4) Identification and development of personal dignity, requiring focus on the dignity of all individuals, groups and communities, etc.

However, these sound unconvincing nowadays

Children in the 21st century have long accepted the fate of thinking and behaving like adults, but the pandemic has raised various moral issues and dilemmas that they cannot solve without the intervention or suggestion of adults. Prohibitions of any kind, the inability to play outdoors and the fear that governs society are facts that can be accepted by children because they are used to obeying, but they can hardly understand the logic behind them. Obedience in the name of life can be credo of adults, but can never been a motive for children. They must either unconditionally accept the pandemic government's order, or at some point, especially teenagers, try to resist it, which can lead to life-threatening situations. Children as well as adults should believe only in life, even during a pandemic, because life is the greatest value.

Even in a situation of severe threat to mankind, Kant's moral rules remain in force:

1. Think for yourself! (Kant, 1993: 183), (as the credo of the prejudice-free way of thinking).

2. Think by putting yourself in everyone else's shoes! (Kant, 1993: 183), (as a broader way of thinking).

3. Always think in agreement with yourself! (Kant, 1993: 183), (as a consistent way of thinking).

The Pandemic and Its Educational Context – Conferences and Other Scientific Forums

Such events are yet to be organized and if the teaching community does not organize them, such organization will be set centrally as a task, because teachers are obliged to be the first to have an answer for any social event or crisis. For many years, the pedagogical community has been gathered on occasions of all kinds in forums that must solve problems of the society in general. However, the school is not a generator system, but a transferring system and it only transmits information over time. Often this information turns out to be either socially unsuitable or socially dangerous. In recent years, teachers have had to teach Civil Education without a civil society in Bulgaria, to introduce innovations and social differentiation of students through set algorithms and to participate in a vast number of trainings with no qualified trainers, etc. Bulgarian teachers are the first to suffer the blow of any social change and the pandemic will not be an exception. They are obliged to show optimism, remain silent about embarrassing facts and fit into the emotional background of society. The idea of endless conferences, and discussing pre-announced things, is nothing new to them. Already in *The Game of Glass Pearls*,

Hermann Hesse describes this process as follows: “Papers were also read – we must briefly talk about this noble kind of literary supplement, too. Specialists, as well as spiritual robbers, offered the burghers of that time, who still held dear the notion of education robbed of its former meaning, articles and a large number of papers not only as solemn speeches on special occasions, but in wild competition and in unimaginable quantities” (Hesse, 1999).

The popularization or formalization of such scientific events related to the pandemic could be avoided if:

- educational forums related to the pandemic remain strictly professional in nature and avoid economic, social, political connotations;
- educational forums related to the pandemic concentrate on a positive and optimistic tone, where the belief in the power of pedagogy as theory and practice dominates over everything else;
- educational forums related to the pandemic offer particular solutions to problems, which do not have a literary-descriptive or utopian character and spirit or depend on something or someone else;
- Educational forums related to the pandemic should consolidate the pedagogical community, not divide it in opposition through artificially created paradigms.
- Educational forums must be realistically aware of the “risks, dangers, uncertainties, probabilities” (Hristova, 2011: 72) that accompany biotechnology and biocrisis in different variants, not only current but also future ones.

Teachers’ (Non)Participation in Agitation and Propaganda in Emergency State of Pandemic

Ideology, propaganda and agitation form a single purposeful process, influencing public consciousness and behavior. It can be realized by specially trained people or institutions, using a system of paraverbal, verbal and other means of expression aimed at the will, feelings and intellect of people. In the 21st century, their main source remains the media, following not only political orders, but also social ones related to the diversion of attention from serious and important issues to emotional threats and collective suggestion. If the media can carry out propaganda orders and turn the pandemic into what it is not, then Bulgarian teachers must counteract in every possible way. The media of the 21st century can afford everything, for the simple reason that they are not just a form of power, but the ultimate manifestation of power. On the problem of the pandemic, Bulgarian teachers must have not only a vigilant civil conscience, but also personal conscience, so as not to sway between different positions within the society and the implementation of contradictory directives of any nature. Bulgarian teachers have no other ministry but the truth. In modern society, unfortunately, it acquires a variety of mimicry such as simulations and simulacrum. In the spirit of Baudrillard, “simulations and simulacrum” are part of the information process,

and its lack of connection to reality. The images of information themselves go through four phases – an image that reflects reality, an image that distorts reality, an image that masks the absence of reality, and an image that has nothing to do with reality (Baudrillard, 1994).

The modern individual, more than ever, creates his/her own mystifications and illusions about reality, because this process makes one feel undisturbed and uninvolved in social reality or unconditionally submit to anything s/he has invented. No one denies the threat the Pandemic poses to humanity, but even so it should not be a threat to the human spirit, and especially to the thinking of children.

The pandemic is a lesson that everyone will learn differently, but within the professional community of teachers, it is also a lesson in dignity. The preservation of the highly positive and optimistic talk that Makarenko once spoke of, is something we need more than anything at this stage „nothing should disturb the general positive talk, cause doubt in the fullness of our life and in the pedagogical community” (Makarenko, 1984: 69). Agitation and propaganda are typically ideological and political acts, and should never be part of teachers' professional message. Their participation in media forums that suggests social ideas or comments on their personal Pandemic-related beliefs in the virtual space threatens the dignity of teachers as a professional guild. It is up to their own conscience whether they will use their professional tribune as a place for empathy with the science they teach and optimism that brings scientific discovery in each field, or will become conduits of fear and social anxiety.

Regression of Education in a State of Pandemic

The words of the American physician Albert Jonsen “Who should live and who should die?” are fundamental to the new bioethics (Jonsen, 2003). We will make several analogies with his theory in the direction of education during a pandemic. The education system, and teaching in times of a pandemic has taken an unexpected turn. We could pay attention to:

- the lack of a comprehensive educational policy for transformation in the educational institutions;
- incompatible educational strategies, some of which have neither been tested nor proven to work, but have been borrowed from countries with a different social status;
- the lack of relevant teacher training despite the numerous training events organized to receive grants from different funds;
- local education solutions that do not have a system and rely on external intermediaries;
- distance learning, which had been talked about for years and had to become effective immediately;

- the impossibility of finding a common language between school and family which have been communicated through artificially created formats in educational institutions. The present situation shows these have been only formal and ineffective;
- the lack of preparedness of the students for transformation towards an education where information technologies dominate, but also deprive students of real-life social communication
- not all children have access to information technology, which puts them at a disadvantage compared with the rest of the students;
- marginalized groups of children have lost their social privileges and have been left solely in the care of their families, who cannot guarantee not only their education but their survival.

Optimizing Education During and After a Pandemic

Every social crisis, including this Pandemic, which is constantly developing from a health problem into an issue of social importance, provides new opportunities in education.

Availability of New Information Tools

Education during a pandemic offers an extremely wide range of information resources and digital environment: social networks, media space, television, etc. quickly reorganized under the circumstances and offering their own courses. However, the issues related to the feedback from students, testing and evaluation remain unresolved and unclear. The psychological mechanisms that affect the minds of children and adolescents in the process of distance learning, associated with this type of resources have not been studied. Technology and its constant use and over-use implemented in education works daily and persistently against the humanization of the interactions of students and centers on the intermediaries.

„Networks, however, do not engage one’s personality as a whole but only individual aspects of it. In addition, they require the personality to suppress all the aspects that are of no interest to them. This is highly unnatural, although one is able to get used to it” (Gatou, 2010).

The presence of a mediator in all kinds of interactions of society changes the child's attitude to the machine, which becomes part of his ontological nature. The pairing of man and machine in the form of a „heterogeneous pair“ (Chalakov, 1997) becomes not only a marker of human existence, but also a special language of expression in the space of networks. Access to networks and information resources is part of the new social situation and hierarchy in society. They will also redistribute the social roles of outsiders and leaders in the world of children, which will become a serious social and moral problem of the school.

Home Schooling in Bulgaria

The Pandemic put forward the possibility of home schooling in Bulgaria. In Daniel Vassilev's comparative study of types of alternative forms of education in England, there are three alternatives to the traditional schooling described. These include home schooling (approximately 100,000 families provide such education to their children), the Waldorf system primarily focused on students' creative development, with a very small number of schools, and democratic school. There are several main reasons why parents prefer this form of education (homeschooling) to other alternative, private or public schools:

- different ideology and /or religion;
- special educational needs of the child;
- disagreement with the subjects taught in public schools;
- dissatisfaction with the quality of teaching;
- disapproval of the social environment;
- inability to pay the tuition fees for private schools⁽¹⁾.

The scandalous book *Dumbing Us Down – the Hidden Curriculum of Compulsory Education* by the American author J. Gatto discusses the issue of “home schooling” as an opportunity to get out of the school crisis. For the American educator, the Family Curriculum is at the heart of the good life, whatever good life means. We have abolished it - now is the time to return to it. Schools must lead the way to a normal, healthy education by being the first to let go of state institutions' grip on family life. Parents and children need to be able to work together for school to strengthen family ties” (Gatto, 2010).

Bulgaria has much to offer in terms of homeschooling, and the Pandemic has accelerated this process. The fact is, however, that Bulgarian society does not have the economic resources to guarantee home education as an alternative. This type of schooling during the Pandemic has set precedents in the attitude of parents towards their children's learning – from total obsession to complete neglect. Most parents quickly grew tired of being their children's teachers, or had to admit their own ignorance. They are looking forward to the day when they will take a break from teaching at home and everything will return to normal. But this day may never come for most families. Some of them have reassessed the cooperation with the teacher and the help that their children need on the way to success.

Home schooling in the context of a pandemic as a health and social crisis in Bulgarian society should be discussed in several ways:

- most of the people in Bulgaria see home schooling only as a temporary measure;
- the lack of pedagogical skills and knowledge of the parents, outside of general knowledge discourse;
- the desire of children to be with their parents as a mechanism for overcoming the alienation that have accumulated between them over the

years, for most parents can become an unbearable burden, especially in the context of education;

- the lack of IT for training during the pandemic, or the lack of skills to work with it, deprives most families of the opportunity to even lay some foundations for modern home schooling;

- home schooling in Bulgaria makes sense only in the context of a mixed type of traditional and home schooling, the latter accompanying and supporting independent education.

The future of home education will be related to the prosperity of the entire society and a very good pedagogical competence of the parents, which they do not have at this stage, and that needs to be included in the school curriculum in the future

The Search for New Educational Technologies of Interaction during a Pandemic

It is indisputable that the school crisis is part of the general societal crisis. Criticism of the school system often turns into real sarcasm: “Neither networks nor schools are communities, just as schooling is not education. School networks occupy 50% of children's time, forcing them to share it only with children of the same age, requiring them to start and stop work when an audible signal is given, forcing people to think the same thing at the same time and in the same way, classifying them as if they were vegetables. Thus (and in many other insidious and insane ways) network schools steal the vitality of communities, replacing it with ugly automatization. No one manages to get through them and keep their humanity intact – not the children, not the teachers, the administrators or the parents” (Gatto, 2010).

However, is the school ready to seek more democratic principles for its organization and set of educational tools during a pandemic? If the school has suffered so much criticism over the years, is it possible for the social crisis of society to turn its marginality into strength? What is certain is that the educational message and interaction of society will change during a pandemic:

- the institutional educational impact and interaction of the society will become technological, and this on the one hand will facilitate its universal messages, but on the other hand will deprive it of its uniqueness

- education within the family will be transformed to include the obligatory involvement of the parent in the educational process. At this stage, the roles of the parent cannot be foreseen and will likely vary widely from client to participant in the learning process.

The role of information intermediaries will significantly increase the opportunities of the media to educate, as well as people's trust in information as a value or just the opposite might happen: an even more severe crisis and precedents of distrust in information will emerge.

Education and the question that will remain after the state of emergency is over:

After the pandemic as a severe health and social crisis, many issues are likely to be reassessed. In the field of education, there will inevitably be unresolved issues such as:

1. Education will not be the same, as the pandemic has tested its resources and its ability to cope in a state of social crisis.

2. Education has a number of negatives, including a full-time form of organization that fully subordinates the child to the institution. In a state of pandemic, it is clear that this is not a necessity for children or teachers.

3. Education is a radical phenomenon and event that can show exceptional ingenuity in dealing with a particular social problem and in protecting children from the dangerous effects of society itself.

4. Education in a state of crisis depends mainly on the professionalism of teachers and their social optimism.

5. Education is the most valuable spiritual resource of society, through which society can be recreated.

Paraphrasing A. Johnson's questions in the new medicine. „Who can live and who can't?" with respect to education, we can ask:

– Who can learn during a pandemic?

– Who should drop out of school during a pandemic?

The answers to these questions are to some extent predictable. In a time of social crisis, as is the pandemic, marginalized groups of children will most probably drop out. These groups include:

– socially disadvantaged children whose families do not have the necessary information resources for education;

– children from ethnic minorities whose parents are unable to help them learn;

– at-risk children who will be neglected by their parents, regardless of the social situation;

– children with special needs, who need the assistance of specialists; this will be difficult to synchronize and provide on a practical level.

The solutions to the educational problems arising in the conditions of pandemic-related crisis allows the creation of flexible spaces, whose design is supported by avant-garde principles and technologies. These include “modern learning environment”, “innovative learning environment”, “flexible learning environment” and “new generation learning spaces” which have become the new education currency in recent years (Benade & Jackson, 2020), The transformation of traditional classrooms involves teachers to deprivatize their practices and make them transparent and transformative in order to rise to the challenges and meet the needs of society and students. In essence, technology is changing not only the learning process, but also education. In a pandemic situation, the inner motives for

the education of each student, his parents, and teachers in the desire to show the optimal effort and will to succeed will come to the fore.

Blended Learning: a perspective for education

A good opportunity to ensure the necessary quality of educational services after the pandemic-related crisis is over is blended learning (on-line and traditional). Education based on the purposeful and planned integration of electronic platforms in a traditional educational context will lead to a better future of Bulgarian education. This combination of face-to-face and online classes resources should vary depending on the learning content, motivation and needs of the learners. It also depends on the ability of teachers to design and implement blended learning in a full educational environment, corresponding to European standards. Bulgarian education will continue to rely on: (1) the transformation of the educational environment into an increasingly student-oriented one in the spirit of constructivism; (2) active training based on social cooperation; (3) access to training materials anywhere and anytime; (4) supporting classical education with the possibilities of electronic platforms and resources for training.

Perhaps the pandemic, as absurd as it may sound, will turn out to be a rehearsal for a better education of children in Bulgaria or at least a step towards its transformation. The reason for this is the fact that education and the operational educational process will face not only difficulties of various nature, but also new challenges. The future of an entire society will probably depend on the way in which the school as an institution, and the whole pedagogical community of teachers, students and parents, will find the strength to solve in a timely manner the problems posed by the times we live in. Once again, the direct connection of the school with the social situation and circumstances and the possibility for the school to be their vanguard will be confirmed.

NOTES

1. Daniel Vassilev. Comparison of state intervention in the education systems of England and Bulgaria. Discussing the alternative forms of education. *The experts' club of economy and politics* http://libsociety.org/public/books/Comparison_England_Bulgaria.pdf (In Bulgarian).

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✉ **Dr. Veska Gyuviyska, Assoc. Prof.**

Web of Science Researcher ID: K-2275-2015
Faculty of Pedagogy
South-West University – Blagoevgrad
66, Ivan Mihailov, St.
2700 Blagoevgrad, Bulgaria
E-mail: v_guviiska@abv.bg

✉ **Dr. Nikolay Tsankov, Assoc. Prof.**

Web of Science Researcher ID: E-3949-2014
Faculty of Education
Trakia University
9, Armeyska, St.
6000 Stara Zagora, Bulgaria
E-mail: nikolay.tsankov@trakia-uni.bg