

Effective Communication Strategies between Municipalities, Schools, Teachers and Parents – Experience of Albania

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Abstract: This study aims to provide information regarding the role of schools, teachers, parents, and public bodies in coping with the pandemic or similar emergency situations by switching to remote education. It is written in the framework of the implementation of the "Distance & Remote Education to Achieve More" project, Erasmus+.

Keywords: Students, parents, teachers, municipality, education, distance, etc.

1. Introduction

The pandemic caused many problems in education affecting not only students but teachers, parents, educational institutions, public institutions, and everyone else involved in the education process. These problems were especially significant in younger ages, however, the consequences were significant in the entire education system since it was a new situation, not faced before, a period of emergency with which everyone had to adapt but lacked tools, equipment, and sometimes the knowledge to do so. This problem was even more significant in rural areas in which there was a lack of electronic devices and sometimes even internet connection.

The Ministry of Education, Sport, and Youth were not prepared for such a situation, and neither were the Municipalities, public and private institutions, teachers, parents, and students. However, all the involved actors tried to do their best to overcome it and continue the teaching and learning process at home, facing their computer or smartphone screens.

1.1. General Information

Albania (Shqipëri or Shqipëria), officially the Republic of Albania (in Albanian: Republika e Shqipërisë), is a country in Southeastern Europe. It is located in the Adriatic and Ionian Seas within the Mediterranean Sea, sharing land borders with Montenegro, Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Greece. Its capital city is Tirana, the largest city. Based on LAW No. 139/2015 "ON LOCAL SELF-GOVERNMENT", (Article 3) the mission of the units of local self-government in the Republic of Albania is to provide effective and efficient governance at a level closest to the citizens and the units of local self-government exercising local governance in the Republic of Albania shall be the municipalities and the regions. The municipalities shall be the basic level of the local self-government. (Article 5). In the Republic of Albania, there are currently 61 Municipalities and 12 regions (qarks). The total population is 2.793.592 citizens (January 2022, INSTAT), living in a total area of it 28,748 km².

The Municipality of Lushnja is located in the southern part of the western Lowland of Albania and it has a population of 130316 individuals (According to the Civil Registration, August 2022). It is divided into 11 Administrative Units, 10 of which are in the rural area. The Municipality of Lushnja has 85 villages under its administration in which 63% of the population lives.

In the Municipality of Lushnja there are 45 educational institutions including: 28 primary public schools, 6 public high schools, 7 public primary-high schools, 3 private schools, 1

vocational school. (ZVAP, Lushnje) Faced with COVID-19 isolation period, all schools switched to remote education.

1.2 Education System in Albania

The pre-university educational system in Albania includes kindergartens, schools, and complementary institutions, public or private. (LAW No.69/20121)

The stages of the education system in Albania consist of:

- Pre-school education (in Albanian: Arsimi parashkollor) (children aged 0 - 6 years old)
 - Basic education (in Albanian: Arsimi Bazë) (children aged 6 - 16 years old)
 - General Upper Secondary education (in Albanian: Gjimnazet) (EURYDICE2)
- Basic education is divided into:
- a) the primary cycle (in Albanian: Arsimi fillor) is composed of five classes I-V,
 - b) lower secondary education (in Albanian: Arsimi i mesëm i ulët) composed of four classes VI-IX,
 - c) Upper secondary education (in Albanian: Arsimi i Mesëm i lartë)

The upper secondary education institutions include:

- Vocational Schools (in Albanian: Shkollat e Mesme Profesionale) two-four years.
- Oriented Education Schools (in Albanian: Shkolla të arsimit të orientuar) including art schools, sports schools, foreign languages schools, and schools oriented in other education areas.

According to the definition in the Pre-University Education Development Strategy 2014-2025, education includes three levels: preschool education, basic education (primary and lower secondary education), and secondary education; while vocational education, according to the National Strategy for Employment and Skills 2014-2020, operates at three levels, offering students general theoretical and practical training, as well as provides them with professional competences and further education:

1. The first level (semi-skilled workers who can enter the labor market);
2. The second level (technicians, who can also enter the labor market);
3. The third level (after which there is the possibility of continuing university studies or entering the labor market).

1.3 Albanian education service

In the field of pre-university education, in the Municipality of Lushnja, the main actor is the Regional Education Directorate (*in Albanian: Drejtoria Arsimore Rajonale – DAR*), which is responsible for the functioning of educational institutions at the district level. Regional Education Directorate implements the Pre-University Education Development Strategy 2021-2026, while providing educational tools for public educational institutions, according to the "per student" formula, and supports the local government in planning, making investments in educational infrastructure, as well as its maintenance. It also has a role in the quality of pre-university education through the awarding of employees of public educational institutions with outstanding achievements and the awarding of scholarships to a selected number of students, through a special fund of the annual budget of the Ministry of Education, Sport and Youth.

Vocational education is a field directly dependent on the Ministry of Economy and Finance, so it is not included in the legal functions of municipalities. In our country, vocational education (VET) is provided through the vocational school.

1.4 Education during COVID-19 Pandemic in Albanian schools

COVID-19, the dangerous and invisible enemy which the whole world was and is still facing, brought a lot of negative and severe consequences in our lives, influencing us psychologically, emotionally and physically. Education, as observed by this 2022 study, was one of the fields in which COVID-19 has an enormous negative effect, not only in

Albania, but worldwide. As most of the teachers in our Municipality have stated, COVID-19 affected the teaching process in a negative way.

In March 2020, there was a complete lockdown and all the classes switched to online classes. The Ministry of Education, Sport and Youth as the highest executive authority of pre-university education management, published a guideline¹ for learning at home, which aimed to guide teachers for the development of learning at home. It also provided other materials and platforms for online learning, exam templates for national exams, video tutorials, etc. in order to support teachers in the teaching process. Organizing this kind of teaching process they aimed to keep students engaged with the subject content and reinforce the knowledge gained so far by students. Videos of primary school teachers of different subjects were also broadcasted in the national television. In cooperation with the Albanian Radio Television (ART) and a television channel, "RTSH School", was created in order for students to watch them at their home and reach a broad audience of the target group, including those who did not have any technological device or internet connection. The Ministry of Education also created a dedicated channel on "YouTube", for uploading the videos for those students who may have missed the TV broadcast as well as follow and repeat the learning topics at any time. (https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC21Y6wkN3En_HKFdt4yWxMQ). Furthermore, according to the same data published on *Eurydice*, European Commission, digital devices were donated to students in need.

This experience of organizing and managing online classes was challenging for teachers, especially older ones who lacked experience with e-learning and using technology in their classes. As stated by most of the teachers, the situation was also harder in rural areas where there was a lack of internet connection as well as technological tools for classes to be organized and attended.

The situation changed in August 2020. However, aiming to provide the pre-university education level with security measures against the spread of the COVID-19 virus during the school year, the Ministry of Education, Sport and Youth and ASCAP, published a guideline. According to this guideline, three main scenarios for the development of the learning process were designed to be implemented depending on:

- the school infrastructure;
- the number of students in the class-room;
- and the spread of the virus in each of them.

These three main scenarios included:

1. Teaching would take place in the physical school environments, maintaining the physical distance if the pandemic situation was stable, meeting the protocol of the Ministry of Health and Social Protection for hygiene and physical distancing. If the number was large, they would reduce the lesson time to 30 minutes (from 45) and build a graph for students and divide the class into groups or sub-groups.
2. A combined lesson in the classroom and at a distance from home (one week at school and one week at home), maintaining all the rules of hygiene and physical distance, in case there would be an aggravated situation of the pandemic would take place.
3. If the situation would worsen significantly, learning from home would be applied. The school would design a school schedule for distance learning online with a dedicated platform.

After the completion of the school year 2020-2021, the Albanian Ministry of Education, Sport and Youth, made an observation in order to identify the achievements of students during these school year as well as to identify the needs and shortcomings of students in each of the subjects. After the whole data was collected and analyzed, they developed a special program including the subjects and knowledge the students needed most. During September 1st 2021 –September 24th 2021 additional lessons were organized in order for students to acquire the knowledge they missed during the pandemic as well as improve and

reinforce their knowledge. The new academic year started on September 27, 2021. (*Eurydice, 2022*)

In the Municipality of Lushnja, since 2016, a Development Center has been established, which offers free services to young people on 6 days of the week (Monday-Saturday). The services are various depending on the needs of each individual. Considering the fact that children with special needs were a target group that was mostly affected by the pandemic and the isolation since they could not receive their daily services at the center, the Municipality of Lushnja implemented a project for improving the situation of the children as well as building the capacities of different actors in providing services to children with special needs. The purpose of this project was to improve the Social Services offered to children with special needs aged 3-16-year-old, during the COVID-19 pandemic. The aim was the capacity building of the Development Center's Staff, Social Workers of the Social Services Department, Social Service Administrators at each Administrative Unit, parents/guardians of children with special needs who attended the Development Center in Lushnja, as well as those of children with special needs aged 3 – 16. The project aimed at creating opportunities for enabling children receive the necessary in-home services, which they previously received at the Center.

The relationship between teachers-students-parents was essential and with special importance during the whole learning process during and after the isolation period. During the period of lock-down and complete isolation, as mentioned above children were not attending any physical classes. The whole learning process was done at home. Some of them following online classes, some following WhatsApp group instructions and some by watching the videos broadcasted by national TV. The relationship between students and their teachers remained essential, however there was a necessity for parents to be even more involved in this relationship as well as the learning process of their children, especially with younger ages.

The purpose of this article is to analyze Albanian experience in coping with the pandemic or similar emergency situations by switching to remote education, involving different actors and stakeholders such as: teachers, pupils, parents, education institutions, public bodies, etc.

2. Methodology

In order to collect data on how the pandemic influenced the learning and teaching process during COVID-19 isolation as well as provide recommendations regarding the support public institutions such as Municipalities should provide in order to facilitate these processes during similar situations, this article uses two research methods including questionnaires and interviews.

This research was conducted by the Municipality of Lushnja, Albania with 250 teachers, 557 students and 362 parents. Questionnaires were prepared for each of the groups.

2.1 Students' Questionnaire

The first group of respondents we aimed to reach in order to collect the data for this study were students of primary schools in the Municipality of Lushnja. The questionnaire contains a total of thirteen questions. The questions as well as the design were adopted to the age of the target group. The type of questions included: short answer questions, multiple choice, checkboxes, yes or no questions, and only three long answer questions. Based on the age of the target group, we recommended them to ask for the help of their parents and teachers to complete the questionnaire and advised their parents and teachers to help them as well. The age of target groups included: 6-7 years old, 8-9 years old, and 10-11 years old students. However, the questionnaire was standardized for all the abovementioned target groups.

In order to reach a broad audience of students enrolled in different primary schools in the Municipality of Lushnja, the questionnaire was created through Google Forms. It was

shared online on the official social media accounts of the Municipality of Lushnja. The participants were part of all the educational institutions in the Municipality of Lushnja.

2.2 Teachers' Questionnaire

The second target group we aimed to reach in order to collect the data was teachers of primary schools in the Municipality of Lushnja. It included a total of ten questions. Questions for teachers allowed the clarification of the situation of the teaching process during the COVID-19 pandemic as well as what could be done in order to facilitate the teaching process in the future. The type of questions were: short answer questions, multiple choice, checkboxes, yes or no questions, and long answer questions. The questionnaire was standardized for all the teachers. Most of the teachers taught students living in rural areas. In order to reach a broad audience of teachers, the questionnaire was created through Google Forms. It was shared online in the official social media accounts of the Municipality of Lushnja, as well as it was directly shared with teachers by the Local Office of Pre-University Education in the Municipality of Lushnja.

2.3 Parents' Questionnaire

The third group covered by the study was parents of school students. The questionnaire included a total of ten questions. Questions for parents concerned how they assisted the learning process of their children at home during the pandemic and how this process could be facilitated during similar situations. The type of questions used were: short answer questions, multiple choice, checkboxes, yes or no questions, and long answer questions. Most of the parents lived in urban areas. In order to reach a broad audience of parents of students in primary schools in the Municipality of Lushnja, the questionnaire was created through Google Forms. It was shared online on the official social media accounts of the Municipality of Lushnja.

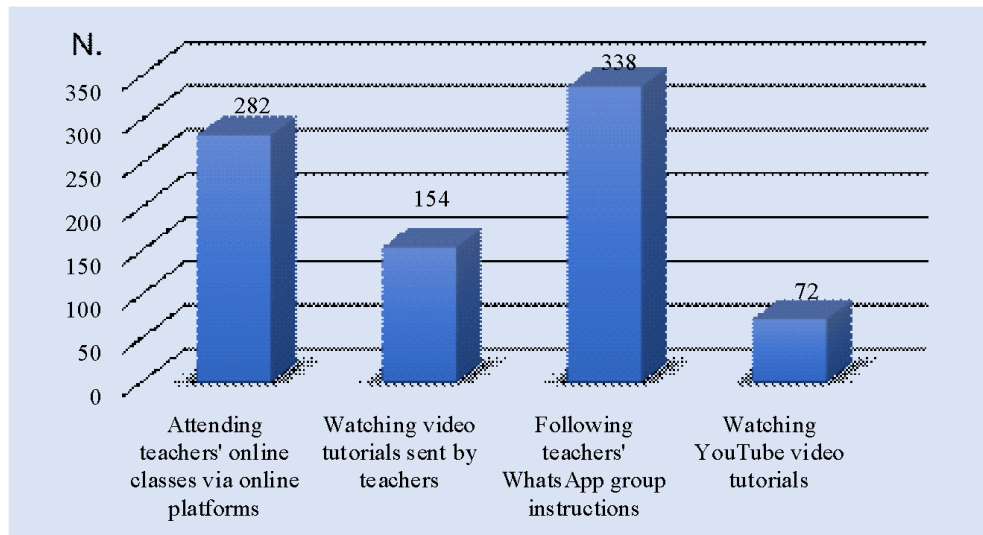
3. Results

3.1 Students

The questionnaire was completed by a total of 557 school students, most of which live in urban areas (56.4%), having internet access at their homes (91.4%). Regarding their technological skills, most of the interviewed reported being medium 68,9%, high 26.9%, and low 4.1%.

Most of the students considered the effects of the pandemic as negative in their learning process, even though most of them answered to have attended online classes, more concretely 75.2%.

The involvement of students in the learning process of during the pandemic, as they report, was made possible through: attending teachers' online classes via online platforms, watching video tutorials sent by their teachers, following teachers' WhatsApp group instructions, and watching YouTube video tutorials (figure 1).



Note: N – number of respondents (school students)

Figure 1. Teaching and learning activities of pupils in the learning process during the pandemic

Being faced with COVID-19 pandemic, pupils attended online classes organized by their teachers mostly using smartphones, followed by laptops and tablets. On the other hand, the students who were not able to attend online classes during the pandemic answered that the main reason they do not attend classes during the pandemic was:

- the lack of internet connection (53.7%)
- being more than two children in the family (36.6%)
- lack of technological devices (22.6%).

Other reasons include:

- being virus-infected,
- not being able to understand the concepts through online classes,
- low internet,
- being the only student attending, etc.

Students stated that technological devices helped them learn and attend classes during the pandemic. They answered that one of the most useful tools used by their teachers to make it easier for them to learn was the videos teachers created for them. The respondents recommended public institutions and the municipality provide free internet access during the pandemic and similar situations and providing technological devices to students, belonging to low-income families and those living in rural areas.

3.2 Teachers

The respondents of the questionnaire included 250 primary school teachers. 57.2 % of them were teachers teaching children living in rural areas and 42.8% of them to children living in urban areas. 33.2% of them considered themselves as having high technological skills, 66 % medium technological skills and only 0.8 % of them considered their technological skills as being low. Regarding the influence of COVID-19 pandemic on the teaching process, most of them stated that the pandemic had a negative influence (87.2%) and few considered it positive (12.8%).

Being faced with Covid-19 isolation, 50.4% of the teachers send students WhatsApp group instructions, 32% of them organized online classes via online platforms and apps and 17.6% of them send video tutorials to their students.

Except for the online platforms and apps such as Zoom, WhatsApp, Messenger, etc., some other methods being used in the teaching process during the pandemic reported by the teachers included: projects, a combination of WhatsApp, video tutorials, and online groups,

sending videos broadcasted by the Ministry of Education, Sports, and Youth, in RTSH school. Some teachers went even further in having telephone communication with each student or their parents, giving them instructions on the lessons.

Even though the teachers tried to continue organizing the classes online using different methods and means, they stated that not all the students attended the classes. More concretely, 42% of the students attended online classes and 58% of them did not attend online classes.

Trying to give an answer to why the students did not attend the online classes organized by their teachers, the teachers answered the reasons were:

- because of the lack of internet connection (35.2%),
- because of the lack of technological devices (42.8 %),
- because of being more than 2 (two) children in the family (22%).

Other reasons included: being sick, having low interest, living in a rural area with low access to the internet, lack of willingness to study, having low incomes, being too young, or all of the abovementioned reasons.

Some of the tools teachers used in making the teaching process more effective during the pandemic include:

- Video tutorials,
- Zoom,
- Google Classroom,
- Google Forms,
- BookWidgets, etc.

Teachers also spent some minutes brainstorming or practicing warm-up exercises to encourage pupils to talk, discuss and express their feelings and experience of the pandemic situation.

Some teacher recommendations on what the Municipality or local public institutions could do in order to improve and facilitate the teaching process are as follows:

- the provision of technological devices such as laptops, video projectors, smart boards, etc.
- the provision of didactic materials,
- Internet connection in schools,
- the provision of technological devices and covering internet expenses, with a special focus on pupils belonging to low-income families or living in rural areas.

3.3 Parents

362 parents of primary school pupils participated, from which: 230 (63.5%) respondents lived in the urban area and 132 (36.5%) lived in the rural area. Most of them claimed that the pandemic effects on the learning process of their children were negative. The majority of parents have 2 or 3 children (58,3 % and 25.4 % respectively).

Most parents answered that the most used technological device in the learning process by their children at home were smartphones (86.3%), followed by laptops (13%), tablets (8.6%), and computers (5.5%). Nearly 90% of the respondents claimed the lack of internet connection at home, which indicates the problems with children's access to remote learning. 95% of the parents assisted their children in learning at home during the COVID-19 isolation period, and 81.5% of the interviewed stated that their children did not attend the online classes organized by teachers. The reasons for the children not attending online classes were:

- Lack of internet (38.4%),
- Lack of technological devices (22.7%),
- Being more than two children in the family (24%).

Some other reasons included: internet connection problems, the quality of the devices, having more than one class to attend, the parent being a teacher and not having enough time to help their own children, the parent having to work at the time the child had to attend the online classes, being the parent, child or relatives being infected with the virus, etc. Parents also state that the children become aggressive in having to attend classes online.

Parents tried to facilitate the learning process of their children by creating creative games and quizzes to reinforce the learning of new concepts, showing them video tutorials, and using additional textbooks. Some parents even used blackboards at home and others hired private teachers for their children.

Parents request the municipalities and other local public institutions to:

- provide technological devices for low-income families,
- enable internet connection or cheaper internet packages for low-income families,
- create online platforms to facilitate learning,
- create virtual classes,
to improve the learning process in similar situations, with a special focus on families living in rural areas.

4. Recommendations

The whole article provided data on the pandemic situation, how it influenced the teaching and learning process, and what solutions were applied being unprepared to such a situation. The article also provided and analyzed the data provided by three crucial actors in the teaching and learning process: students, teachers, and parents. This section aims to provide some solutions and recommendations on how can public bodies and the government facilitate the learning and teaching process during a pandemic or similar emergency situation.

Some of the solutions provided by the data provided by three different groups of respondents include:

- the provision of technological devices such as laptops, video projectors, smart boards, and other relevant technological equipment, with a special focus on low-income families and those living in rural areas;
- the provision of didactic materials,
- Internet connection in schools and cheaper internet packages for low-income families,
- the creation of online platforms to facilitate the learning and teaching process for both students and teachers, as well as parents who assist their children at home.

A good model which can be replicated as a best practice by other public bodies, educational institutions, and other stakeholders and actors at the local, national, and international levels, which was the case of D.R.E.A.M. project, some recommendations on how to facilitate the learning and teaching process include:

- the provision of video tutorials for teachers on how to use technological tools and devices,
- the provision of lesson plans to serve as guidelines in online teaching;
- the provision of video lessons to be used at home by children and parents,
- the creation of dedicated spaces with relevant technological devices and internet connection for children to access all the necessary information during online learning, with a special focus on children of low-income families and children living in rural areas.

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