

HUMAN RESOURCES IN EDUCATION AND TEACHING CHALLENGES DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract: *In this paper, we will present some results of a didactic-scientific project based on qualitative research carried out between November 2020 and January 2021 with the participation of Master students from the social specializations of "1 Decembrie 1918" University in Alba Iulia. The opening section proposes a brief review of the specialized literature on the issue of online education and human resources during the COVID-19 pandemic. Also, here we will briefly present aspects related to self-image and aspects of co-social behaviours in teaching groups. In the section dedicated to the methodology, you can find the topics covered by the research tool (interview guide) and a very brief presentation of the studied group. The results of the research highlighted the fact that, although there were no staff restructurings in education, the transition to online education was a big challenge for teachers. Communication, constant and beneficial, imposed by the need to adapt to new realities, increased solidarity in teaching staff groups, but without being able to replace direct contact with students, contact considered a fundamental condition for success in education. The pandemic context, it turned out, also had a negative impact on teachers' self-image and social capital. As an opening for new research, the need to know the students' perspective on online education is indicated.*

Keywords: pandemic, human resources, online education, self-image.

1. Introduction

As schools were closed to deal with the global pandemic, experts noted, students, parents and teachers around the world felt the unexpected effect of the COVID-19 pandemic. While governments, frontline workers and health officials have done their best to slow the outbreak, education systems have tried to continue to provide quality education for all during these challenging times (Pokhrel and Chhetri, 2021, p. 3). As we know, things were the same in Romania.

In this paper we will present some results of a didactic-scientific project based on qualitative research and carried out between November 2020 and January 2021 with the participation of Master students from the social specializations of "1

Decembrie 1918" University from Alba Iulia (Development and Management of Human Resources and Social and Health Services Design and Management)¹. Based on a semi-structured interview, the students interviewed, during the peak period of the pandemic, more than 80 employees from different fields of activity such as economics, social assistance and education. The responses of education employees are the subject of the work proposed here. Therefore, its opening section proposes a brief review of the specialized literature on the issue of online education and human resources during the COVID-19 pandemic. Also here, we will briefly insert aspects related to self-image and co-social behaviours in teaching groups. In the section dedicated to the methodology, you can find the topics covered by the research instrument (the interview guide) and a very brief presentation of the teaching staff group involved in the research. The results of the research highlighted the fact that although there were no staff restructurings in education, the transition to online education was a big challenge for teachers. Constant and beneficial communication imposed by the need to adapt to new realities, increased solidarity in teaching staff groups, without being able to replace direct contact with students, contact considered a fundamental condition for success in education. The pandemic context also had a negative impact on teachers' self-image and social capital. As openings for new research, we will finally signal the need to know the students' perspective on online education.

2. Online learning during the pandemic: challenges and impact on the human resource in education

In many countries, one of the main problems has been low or limited access to the Internet and digital devices. Another problem arose when both parents of home-schooled children were away at work, and in addition to exposing students to increased screen time, parents were unable to provide guidance and support (Pokhrel and Chhetri, 2021, p. 4).

Online learning took two forms: synchronous and asynchronous. Synchronous learning involved direct interactions between teachers and students, using real-time means of communication, while asynchronous learning was indirect learning, using an independent learning approach, as noted by Rasmitadila et al. (2020, p. 3).

Rahayu and Wirza (2020, p. 4) observed that online learning had the advantages of convenience, time saving, but also low costs, which led to the adoption and continuous use of e-learning. However, this type of teaching also came with certain disadvantages: social interactions were reduced or non-existent, students' attention on the taught content was easily lost, active participation and answers to teachers' questions was reduced, there was a risk of cheating or copying during assessments and increased the likelihood of piracy and plagiarism.

At the same time, the increased and unstructured time spent online exposed students to potentially harmful or even violent content, as well as an increased risk

¹ The project was coordinated by Prof. univ. Dr. Mihai Pascaru, holder of "Socio-psychological foundations of human resources development" course.

of cyberbullying. At the opposite pole there were areas, especially rural ones, where the children's families are made up of farmers (some illiterate), and the students had to work alongside their parents to the detriment of online education, and they would have to repeat the class next school year, noted Pokhrel and Chhetri (2021, p. 5).

Given the limited online teaching time, the pace of learning, instructional objectives and assessment of learning were affected and posed a real challenge for teachers. Rasmitadila et al. (2020, pp. 8-10) observed that an online meeting was usually shorter than an hour in the classroom, it was accompanied by various technical obstacles arising from the lack of experience with online teaching tools of both teachers, as well as of the students, but also of the extended period of students' accommodation to this type of teaching. For these reasons, some teachers ended up making home visits to students to distribute study materials and not to deprive them of the right to learn, with the risk of spreading the Covid-19 virus.

Teachers were not careless during the abrupt transition from traditional teaching to that imposed by pandemic conditions, but felt concern, frustration, overwhelm (Jones and Kessler, 2020, pp. 4-7). Studies have brought to attention a number of problems reported by teachers during online teaching, noted Rubilar and Oros (2021, p. 2), namely: severe back pain, headaches, muscle contractions, exhaustion, anxiety, dizziness, states of anxiety, nervousness, sleep disorders and eating disorders. For teachers who perceived the workload as greater than the resources available to fulfil it, the intention to continue practicing the profession, or to choose it again if the opportunity arose, decreased significantly. One might think that teachers who experienced intense levels of stress used ineffective coping methods in online teaching. Consequently, they may have seen their emotional resources as depleted and thus developed negative attitudes towards students and experienced feelings of low competence and success at work (Rubilar and Oros, 2021, p. 9).

Despite the benefits of technology, some factors that can be considered negative when it comes to the online learning environment can be underestimated, such as teachers' confidence in their ability to face new challenges through flexible teaching styles and new educational strategies (Pellone, 2021, p. 4).

If in the past some teachers valued autonomy, note Honigsfeld and Nordmeyer (2020, p. 2), in this new context most teachers preferred not to be alone. As a result, a shift towards a collaborative mentality was observed, favoured by the new teaching contexts that occurred with the onset of the pandemic.

3. Research methodology

In the didactic-scientific project mentioned in the introduction, the method used was the semi-structured interview. In designing the interview guide, the main themes were: 1) *changes at the workplace in the context of the pandemic*; 2) *the impact of the pandemic on relations with work colleagues*; 3) *new work requirements determined by the conditions of the pandemic*; 4) *the impact of the pandemic on the relationship between management and employees*; 5) *the extent to which the activity was carried out online*; 6) *employees' self-image during the*

pandemic; 7) the improvement opportunities offered by organizations during the pandemic; 8) personal view on the evolution of the pandemic.

The research group among teaching staff consisted of seven people, most of them working at the department in Alba Iulia. All of them had higher education, most of them including a master's degree.

4. Research results

Although there were no staff restructurings in education, as in other fields, in some educational institutions it was necessary to hire non-teaching staff, staff who had a very important role in complying with the prevention rules against the spread of the SARS-virus COV2, by sanitizing and disinfecting classrooms: *In the context of this pandemic, a series of necessary measures were taken in our school, but there were no staff restructurings. On the contrary, new hires were made for non-teaching staff, in terms of ensuring the classrooms cleanliness and disinfection* (F, 40 years old, University, Primary education teacher, 17 years of seniority, Alina Monica S.).

The work of all teaching staff has moved from being carried out in the classroom, face-to-face, to being carried out online, which has involved adapting teachers to the new digital tools needed for teaching, and this change has increased the time to prepare lessons.

The context of the pandemic required the adoption of disease prevention rules, which in some places led to a decrease in the work satisfaction of teaching staff, due to distance or even the transition of learning to the online environment: *I believe that all these measures influenced work satisfaction in a less desirable, pleasant way. It is a period of adaptation, but it is not easy to work in such conditions. I believe that traditional education is beneficial for our students and cannot be replaced by any other form of education* (F, 40 years old, University, Primary education teacher, 17 years old, Alina Monica S.).

Hierarchical relationships were affected due to technical communication difficulties, but, nevertheless, the interviewed teachers stated that compliance with the prevention rules strengthened the solidarity within the teaching staff: *The pandemic led employees to collaborate and help each other, even remotely so that it can cope with the demands of online work.* (F, 43, University, teacher, 3 years of experience, Gabriela P.).

Asked how they would characterize their colleagues, if they perceived them as trusting and tolerant towards other ethnicities, the majority of those interviewed reported on the openness to communication and dialogue of their colleagues, most of them trusting others and being tolerant towards members of ethnicities with which they interact. When asked if people used to hang out with friends, respondents had mixed opinions, with some relying on peers' responsibility to keep their distance from acquaintances in order not to spread the virus, while others believed that peers are likely to hang out with certain acquaintances.

Regarding the self-image, the respondents were of the opinion that it underwent changes due to the pandemic, in the sense that all the novelties that came

with this virus, led to the empowerment of people, to the awareness of their capabilities, limits and the importance that health has in everyone's life: *I think that man has realized in this pandemic that he is passing through life, that health is the most important both for us and for our loved ones* (F, 38 years old, University, Primary education teacher, 12 years of work seniority, Ramona C.).

From the interview responses on this topic, I was also able to extract the fact that there were likely to be people who stopped performing due to a loss of confidence in themselves, some suffering from anxiety states and stress caused by fatigue and a large volume of work, among employees in the medical field.

Most of the interviewed teachers declared that the educational institution they belong to supported the continuous training of teachers, encouraging and offering the opportunity to participate in courses and webinars that helped teachers: *Most colleagues participated in training/improvement courses on online teaching by discipline. In the first part of the pandemic period, the school itself organized weekly, courses on the use of Microsoft Teams platform by all teaching staff and there were exchanges of best practices between us* (F, 40 years old, master's degree, Teacher, 15 years old, Gabriela P.).

In general, the interviewed teachers felt very affected by the loss of face-to-face connection with family, relatives or students, but they perceived this period as a challenge to a new situation in which they had to look for adaptation methods: *I personally believe that the connection between the teacher and the student is extremely important, that it cannot be done online, but it is an alternative to overcome a crisis situation, and health is the one that wins* (F, 40 years old, master's degree, Teacher, 15 years old, Gabriela P.)

4. Conclusions and Openings

The field of education was one of the most affected ones during the pandemic. Not only did the participation of teaching staff and students move to the online environment, in addition, this move involved considerable efforts to adapt to new conditions for conducting instructional-educational processes, in a very short period of time.

Fortunately, in education it was not necessary to implement personnel restructuring, thus eliminating a stress factor present in other fields of activity. On the other hand, teacher-student communication suffered a lot, feedback on online didactic activities being realized with great difficulty.

Within working relationships, an increase in solidarity between colleagues was noted, helping each other to discover new applications and means of online teaching, sharing examples of good practice with each other and maintaining open communication throughout the online school, both within the teaching staff and in hierarchical relationships.

As insights from our paper, we believe that future research should document students' experiences in this online learning context. As noted by Zorkić et al. (2021, p. 4), many studies highlight the consequences of unequal access to distance education, both from the perspective of students' well-being and from the perspective

of gaps in countries economic development, but there are still few studies that present students' perspective and experiences in managing online learning processes in the context of moving education to online format due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

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