

Online learning during the COVID Pandemic -19. The difference between rural and urban areas. The case of Albania (Elbasan).

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Abstract

This study is focused on the effectiveness of teaching and learning in basic education in urban and rural schools during the SARS CoV-2 pandemic period. Demographic movements, migration and emigration have led to the abandonment of the village as well as to the reduction of the number of students attending schools in the village. By this situation, but also by the economic difference between the village and the city, in our study we hypothesized that online learning in the village has been more difficult and the access that students have had to it has been lower. This study aims to identify the educational situation during online learning and access of children living in rural areas, highlight the difficulties of this process and see whether children, teachers and parents were prepared in relation to the use of technology. Our study made it clear that online teaching has not been effective for a large number of students, especially in rural areas.

Keywords: online teaching, teaching effectiveness, access to teaching, urban areas, rural areas

Introduction

In Albania, according to INSTAT data (CENSUS 2011), more than 65% of the population lives in urban areas. This is related to a number of economic and social factors. Abandonment of the village, migration and emigration has made the number of students attending school in the village lower than that of those attending school in the city. The Municipality of Elbasan has a total of 8126 students attending the 9-year school in the city (official data of ZVA Elbasan), of which 3910 are girls and 4210 are boys. Meanwhile, in rural areas, 5285 students (official data of ZVA) attend 9-year education in the municipality of Elbasan, of which 2634 are girls and 2651 are boys. The situation of abandonment of the village is accompanied by another phenomenon in education, that of the collective classes (school portal.al). This phenomenon has also affected the municipality of Elbasan where the number of collective classes is 52 (ZVA). Given this situation, but also the economic difference between the village and the city, in our study we hypothesized that online learning in the village has been much more difficult and the access that students have had to it has been lower. The hypothesis of our study that in rural areas students had less access during the pandemic than in urban areas is based on INSTAT data (Census 2011) that rural areas in Albania are less developed in terms of technology, internet use, use of tools for online teaching and learning such as smartphone, tablet, computer or pc. In the period March-June 2020, schools were closed and teaching in educational institutions took place online (DCM no. 243, dated 4.03.2020), due to the COVID-19 pandemic. According to a study conducted for this period of time (Skillsforjobs.al "Report on the functioning of distance learning) in its results it appears that 82% of teachers and 63% of students have used the hatsupp application, but according to the same study only 14% of teachers consider it functional. In these conditions, the question arises how the learning process was realized and how effective was it? On the other hand, given the more limited opportunities in rural areas to access the Internet or devices that enable distance learning, the question normally arises as to how involved children in rural areas have been in online learning? In the studies conducted on this phenomenon during the period when the teaching was realized 100% online in Albania, there are no studies on the access to online learning of students in rural areas.

Our study aims to identify the educational situation during online learning and access of children living in rural areas, highlight the difficulties of this process and see if children, teachers and parents were prepared in relation to the use of technology.

According to a study by INSTAT (Use of information and communication technology in the family, 2021, INSTAT) it turns out that today families have more access to the Internet than in 2020, the year when teaching was done all online, from 83% today has gone 85%. But what is noticed in this study is the fact that in the household the highest number in absolute is occupied by smartphones and to a much lower extent occupied by computers about 22%, tablets about 8.8%. This shows that in Albanian families with more than one child in school one of them has used technology. This is because even with the launch of various platforms like mesovet, eduforschool is not that the result has been very positive.

Methodology

In this study we used secondary data analysis (Bryman). Statistical data of state institutions such as INSTAT, Local Office of Pre-University Education Elbasan or municipalities are seen in the comparative context to understand the dynamics of education in rural and urban areas. This has helped us to subsequently construct semi-structured questionnaires for teachers and parents of children. We used the qualitative method in this second phase of the study as it allows us to understand the experiences and direct sensitivities (Bryman) of parents and teachers who have been directly involved in the online learning process. The questionnaires were distributed in two forms: physically and online (via email) to those teachers and parents whom we could not physically contact due to the pandemic. The selected sample was with probability (Bryman) were selected at this stage of the study to interview 5 teachers in 9-year education in urban areas and 5 teachers of 9-year education in rural areas. 10 parents of children were also interviewed: 5 in urban areas and 5 in rural areas. The study lasted 3 months and is located in the territory of the Municipality of Elbasan. We have chosen this geographical area of Albania, which lies in the area of central Albania, is not the capital of the country and we have chosen to understand in this way the dynamics of this phenomenon throughout Albania. The questionnaires are divided into 3 sessions and try to answer the research questions as well as to confirm the hypothesis raised in our study.

The results

The first interviews about our study were distributed to teachers. A total of 10 teachers were interviewed, 5 in urban areas and 5 in rural areas. Teachers teach mainly in 9-year education and more specifically from the first grade to the fifth grade. About 80% of teachers had over 15 years of work experience in teaching. 20% of them over 3 years in education.

Asked about their experience regarding the use of technology in pre-pandemic teaching they admit that they had little or no experience. One teacher says: *I privately completed two courses before the repentance, but I had difficulty using ZOOM.*

Another says: *I knew very little about the use of technology, I had branched out for it, but for the first time I encountered it during the pandemic.*

Most teachers, when talking about the use of technology, introduced the use of word, power point and almost no one the use of teaching platforms. So when asked how they connected with their students during online learning, 90% of them connected to the WhatsApp application, 5% to social networks like face book and 5% to platforms like Akademia.al. The teachers who mentioned the Akademia.al platform were teachers whose schools had accessed this platform through projects. Regarding the access that students had, teachers testify that about 60% of them responded to participation in online learning, or rather had access. Then, over the days, that figure became about 70%. But regarding the difficulties of this process, almost all teachers admit that the difficulty was not only on the part of the students, but they themselves have encountered many difficulties especially at the beginning of it. Some teachers admit that the process of taking and giving assignments lasted until the evening. One teacher says: *Students did not all go to school at the same time because their parents could be at work or in the family, they only had one smart phone and it had a brother or sister.*

A teacher from a school in a rural area says: *The lack of personal tools, the lack of internet often made the students not attend the lesson regularly and this created problems in the continuation of the lesson.*

In the third session, the last question what would be the suggestion of teachers regarding this process, almost everyone says that *“before we talk about the platforms provided by the Ministry of Education or the Local Education Office or even the school should be equipped students with the right tools that otherwise has no value. Then it is important that this process starts in schools to make TIC laboratories functional for both students and us.”*

In our study we also involved parents to understand their perceptions and appreciation about this process so important to their children.

We interviewed an equal number of parents in rural and urban areas most of the interviewed parents are students' mothers, they responded more quickly to our request to be part of this study. In total 80% are mothers and 20% are fathers.

Asked about the number of children, what stands out is that in rural areas they have almost all 3 children and above, while in urban areas the number of children does not exceed 2. This was a very interesting fact, which can open the possibility of future studies.

Regarding to the use of technology by parents, they say: *“I used it to listen to more music on my tablet or even my phone. We do not have a computer or PC in the family. We did not need it until the pandemic started, we could not even afford to buy one. We plan to take it, but to see”.*

Another parent says that *"we have a pc at home because I have it at work, I use the technology for work mainly excel, word."*

But what stood out was the fact that none of the parents had heard of online teaching until the pandemic started, whether parents from rural or urban areas.

Regarding the attendance or attendance of online learning by children about 70% of parents admit that children have attended online learning, but when asked about the correctness of this process over 40% admit that children have not been systematic and link this lack of internet or equipment .

The devices used in the pandemic period for online learning have been mainly telephones and this in rural areas has been higher. About 70% of parents in rural areas admit that the device used by children for online learning has been the telephone, while 30% say they have also used tablets or computers. In urban areas these data vary: about 50% of students have only used the phone for online learning, 50% have used tablets, parents' PCs or even computers they own in the family.

Parents have been a very important part of this process and most of them due to the pandemic have been at home so in relation to the help they have given their children during online learning 90% say that they have helped or tried, while 10% said that we did not have the opportunity because they worked in such sectors that did not interrupt work such as medicine, law enforcement, etc.

Regarding to the interest of children in learning during the pandemic period, parents say: *"In the beginning, they had difficulty communicating with teachers, they connected with friends after school when they asked each other about tasks they did not understand. Over the weeks they started and lost interest because they got very tired. "Several times it happened that my daughter did not manage to start the tasks on time or we started them too late."*

A parent in a rural area says that *"at first he liked the idea that the lesson would be done from home by phone, but when he had to do homework or tests he had difficulty and became nervous."*

Regarding to the assessment that parents have of online learning , 90% of parents in rural areas think that online learning has not been effective and has nothing to do with classroom learning so they would no longer prefer it for their children.

Parents in urban areas have a more positive approach as they think that children became more proficient in using technology, but even here about 60% of parents think that online learning was not effective and that children have a lot of gaps even though they are repeated when they went back to schools. Asked if the children knew the use of technology, only parents in urban areas say 50% that the children knew it from school because they took computer courses privately or even from the TIC subject they do at school. 90% of parents in rural areas claim that their children were familiar with the use of watches or telephones, but had no knowledge of the use of technology.

According to them, the TIC course they did in school did not help them because they did not use computers in this course, but only did it theoretically. Parents also admit that in families with more than two children it was impossible for teaching to be effective as they could not pick up and start homework with just one phone call at home. The greatest difficulties during this period were encountered in lessons, which they did not understand and could not respond in time to the teachers' requests for assignments or tests.

Conclusions and recommendations

Our study made it clear that online teaching has not been effective for a large number of students in both rural and urban areas. What we learned from him is that in rural areas the situation has been even more difficult. What has made online teaching difficult during the pandemic has obviously been the lack of suitable equipment, such as: computers, pc, tablet. Most teachers and children have used hats app phones and apps. Very few have managed to access platforms dedicated to teaching and learning. In rural areas the situation has been even more difficult as a significant number of children also had problems with internet access and this made work more difficult.

Domestic telephone use by 2 or 3 children at the same time was a more visible phenomenon in rural areas than urban ones.

The extension of the lesson until the late hours of the evening caused the interest of the children to decline.

What came out as a conclusion in our study is that in rural areas online teaching has not been effective despite the efforts made by parents and teachers.

We would recommend that immediate measures be taken and that schools be equipped with TIC laboratories (also based on the 2021-2026 education strategy). These laboratories enable students and teachers to learn about the use of online teaching platforms, mainly in rural areas.

To increase the knowledge for teachers in the use of technology in teaching through trainings, which can be offered by universities in the field of continuing education or even by the Education Offices themselves.

To equip families with limited economic opportunities with computers or even the children of these families with tablets.

To conduct quantitative studies to identify shortcomings in various subjects and to create summer courses for students who want and need to make up for lost lessons.

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