



Co-funded by the
Erasmus+ Programme
of the European Union

Digital cOmpetence to teach youth with migranT background

Code: 2020-1-BE01-KA226-SCH-082742



Education and Covid 19 in Greece

«a first Approach»

The reality of the new Covid-19 coronavirus and the effects of the pandemic on international level form an unprecedented setting for citizens and organized societies. International education systems were called upon to take on the responsibility of moving to a new one in the shortest possible time emergency home learning support environment.

According to UNESCO data updated on 27 April 2020, the 91.3% of pupils / students in 188 countries around the world do not go to school / university (UNESCO, 2020). What happened in Greece?

It is very important to know the structure of the Greek Education System and how it works, in order to fully understand the actions taken to address the truly unprecedented situation created with Covid 19. Given that the Greek Education System is essentially divided into Primary, Secondary and University Education, it is important to study in depth the actions carried out at each level of education separately in the Covid period for students with an immigrant background. However, in our case the interest is more focused on students of Secondary education, although more or less the same methods were followed in the other levels of education.

Most immigrant students come from neighboring countries such as Albania and Bulgaria but also from Germany. So, these students, since they are in Greece for many years from primary education, are already fully integrated in secondary education and follow the program followed by all students. Students with an immigrant background can

attend additional support classes after the end of the regular duration of each school unit (remedial teaching) in specific subjects, but so can the rest of students.

Therefore, all students in the Covid period were treated in the same way. In general, all students attended synchronous distance education courses through the Cisco Webex platform (webex.com) as well as asynchronous distance education courses, all of which provided support material with the platform of the Panhellenic School Network called eclass - <https://eclass.sch.gr/> (similar to Moodle).

In Greece, only the refugees, coming the last five years from countries such as Syria, Afghanistan and others were treated differently, mainly because they did not know the Greek language but also had not previously attended any level of education of the Greek system. Thus, in the pre-covid era, the students were partially integrated in various levels of education in integration departments with special teachers for learning Greek language and literature, as well as teaching other basic subjects such as mathematics and physics. During the rest of the school hours, they attended some courses such as Informatics together with the other students in order to integrate into the school community. This process was followed in the Covid period as well. The students attended online classes with their teachers as before and entered the other classes online as well. As we will see below in the first Covid period there was a large abstention of students from online courses, for various reasons, such as lack of equipment and internet. In the second period - Covid school year things were clearly better but again there was a large abstention of students from the educational process. Various incentives and facilities for the students were given by the Ministry of Education, such as equipment purchase voucher 200 euros and free internet but the whole process was delayed considerably.

Greece before it manages to recover from the painful social and economic effects of the crisis that started in 2009 (reduction of 25% of GDP), is called to tackle the unprecedented challenges of the COVID-19 epidemic when at the same time 15% of the population is experiencing extreme poverty. According to official figures, although eight out of ten households have Internet access, less than half of citizens have basic ICT knowledge. This finding acquires special value in the current period as well parents are called, among others, to support their children in order to access the new environment remotely support (Anastasiadis, 2020).

The Greek education system is called upon to deal with the pandemic COVID-19 under adverse conditions (underfunding, infrastructure backlog and accessibility to online learning environments, lack of training on the pedagogical use of ICT etc.) with teachers to have lost a significant part of their purchasing power lately years. At this point we point out that 72.68% of the permanent teachers are over 50 years old.

1st Period of Covid 19 in Greece

During the 1st period (Spring 2020) of the Prohibition / Lockdown and after one first short period of searching for the best solutions that followed the decision to close schools, the central planning at the level Ministry of Education for Primary and Secondary Education set as primary aimed at strengthening technological infrastructure at national level (environment record management, synchronous and asynchronous learning environments) while at the same time ensured free access from mobile phones on services and applications of the Panhellenic School Network.

The response of teachers and students exceeded all expectations (Panhellenic School Network – PSN Report, 2020), as until November 30, 2020:

- from a total of 180,000 teachers (permanent and substitute) have been registered 151,639 teachers (85% of the total) and approximately 1,022,864 students in total 1,448,916 (70.5% of the total).
- 83,462 Teachers and 465.688 students have registered in the e-me environment and 131747 "Cells-Lessons" have been created (Digital Education E-me Platform, November 2020).
- Respectively in the e-class environment according to the latest statistics data of the PSN, of November 2020, for the current school year 2020-2021, the Electronic School Classroom (eclass.sch.gr) hosts 301.626 e-lessons, 1.012.750 students and 148.535 teachers from 9.899 schools across the country.

In a very short time the educational radio and television took over support of distance education for all grades of primary school with creation of videotaped lessons, while at the same time ensuring the free access to all available digital services for on-demand viewing of emissions and their integration into Internet learning environments (Papadimitriou, 2020).

During the 1st period (Spring 2020) there were obvious objective difficulties where they acted as a deterrent to the design and implementation of central level of a coherent framework for action for the Distance Learning (fast – track training, preparation of concise guides, indicative educational material, etc.), which would allow the pedagogical support of teachers in order to be able to meet the requirements of the new teacher environment. The focus of central planning in the first period was focused more on

remote technology support for teachers and students with an emphasis on asynchronous learning environments.

On March 10, 2020 the Greek government published the act “Tefkhos B’ 783/10.03.2020” suspending face-to-face educational processes in all schools and educational facilities in the country (Ephimerida tis Kiverniseos tis Ellinikis Dimokratias, 2020a). More specifically, this decision was of mandatory character and referred to educational institutions of all levels -public or private- as well as private tuition centers and foreign language teaching centers (Skoumpopoulou, 2021).

Nevertheless, children were left out of educational processes only for six days, as the government soon released an announcement for the onset of distance learning on March 16, offering guidelines for its operation (Greek Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs, 2020a). According to the same source, Ministry’ s official site, lessons would occur via both synchronous and asynchronous tools, as students would participate in online classes, using the online conference platform “Cisco WebEx Meetings” , but also receive the teaching material through the digital platforms “e-me” (e-me.edu.gr) or “e-class” (eclass.sch.gr), after being registered to the “PanHellenic School Network” . The government, also, made provision for free access to all these platforms through just a cellphone (Anastasiadis, 2020).

Students of the upper grade of secondary education were the first to begin with distance learning, due to the fact that they were preparing intensively for their final exams for graduation, while the rest of the grades followed some days later (Greek News Agenda, 2020). It is important to clarify that the participation of either teachers or students to online education was not mandatory (Alfavita, 2020a, Nikiforos, Tzanavaris & Kermanidis, 2020).

As regards the efficacy of online education in Greece during the first lockdown, research data agree that it was implemented adequately. According to the first official assessment made and published by the Greek Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs (2020b) as regards the first two months of operating distance education, almost 41,000 online synchronous courses took place per day, with 766, 458 students participating. Another research also claims that teachers of primary education -specifically kindergarten teachers responded adequately in the online teaching procedures, using both synchronous and asynchronous means (Foti, 2020). The study of Nikiforos, Tzanavaris and Kermanidis (2020), on the experience of both primary and secondary teachers during the first period of distance education, claims that only 3.8 % of them did not implement distance teaching at all.

On the other hand, the same research underlines that, although teachers expressed a positive attitude on the experience, there were significant difficulties that they had to deal with (Nikiforos, Tzanavaris and Kermanidis, 2020). Teachers' lack of digital skills and previous experience in teaching online, in combination with "poor, or non-existing" internet connection for both educators and students, made the process challenging (p.2). The research of Tzifopoulos (2020) points out that students were, also, unprepared for using technology in education. Although the same research confirms that teaching procedures had already been adapted to the new distance-teaching conditions within the first month, with students and teachers being engaged in online learning, it, also underlines that is doubtful whether teachers responded properly in using the digital tools in a way that benefited the students.

2nd Period of Covid 19 in Greece

During the 2nd period (October-November 2020) at central level design:

- The role of educational television was upgraded with the addition of new ones objects, which should be further enriched and mainly to be interconnected with the school routine (to be used as asynchronous supplementary educational material by teachers and teachers)

- The level of technological capabilities of the PSN was upgraded as well access to asynchronous environments eclass and e-me, but which are still two "parallel universes" causing significant malfunctions throughout the community.

- The technological access to the environment of Synchronous Distance Learning (WEBEX) in all teachers and students despite their dysfunctions first days managed to respond to an unprecedented for the data technological venture.

- The emphasis in the 2nd period (as in the 1st) was given to the technological dimension of Distance Learning. The absence of a pedagogical framework was obvious and this resulted in the instrumentalization of the Distance Learning in technological terms with what this means for the quality of the courses offered and ultimately the effectiveness of the whole effort.

On November 14, 2020, due to fear for a second attack of the Covid-19 virus, the Greek government ordered another suspension on the function of schools of all levels from November 16, publishing the act "Tefkhos B' 5043/14.11.2020" (Ephimerida tis Kiverniseos tis Ellinikis Dimokratias, 2020b). The differences of this publication, in comparison to that of March 2020, lied on the fact that this time the decision mentioned

only synchronous distance learning and public television as the methods of distance education that would be applied (Greek Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs, 2020c). This means that students would attend online courses, exactly like the previous time and, also, watch recorded lessons delivered by teachers in the state channels. What is more, this time the participation of teachers and students in synchronous courses was mandatory (KATHIMERINI, 2020).

Almost no research data were found as regards the results of the second attempt to implement distance education in Greece, probably due to the very little time intervening between the second lockdown and the publication of the present paper. Nonetheless, an article was published, a few days after the new governmental decision was announced, by “Alfavita”, one of the most popular sites with updates for educators in Greece (Alfavita, 2020b). According to the article, the second distance-learning experience found educators and students almost as unprepared as they were during the first lockdown, although the new measures were obligatory. More specifically, the authors claim that educators were forced, once again, to use their personal digital equipment, as the State never provided them with everything they needed, while some educators and students did not even possess a computer, neither on the first nor at the second lockdown. What is more, it is stated that this ministerial decision required synchronous courses to follow the schedule of face-to-face lessons, meaning that this time students and teachers had to sit in front of their computers for several hours; according to the authors, the instruction during the first lockdown was to implement two thirty-minute lessons per week, while on the second they would have to work online at least for three hours every day. The last point made in the article concerned the recorded lessons projected in the state channels; the authors claim that those lessons were recorded during the first lockdown and, therefore, corresponded to non-relevant teaching material (Skoumpopoulou, 2021).

The impact of COVID-19 in refugee education

Nevertheless, online education was, as mentioned before, a new experience for primary and secondary teachers (Nikiforos, Tzanavaris & Kermanidis, 2020) and, more than that, it had to be carried through in such difficult times, when public health was threatened. If this was the case for mainstream classes during the pandemic, then it is reasonable to assume that educators involved with refugee students had even more obstacles to overcome, as their students are more likely to face challenging living conditions. This section is dedicated to data found on the latter aspect (Skoumpopoulou, 2021).

Even before the pandemic, refugee students were much more likely to be left out of school -twice as likely- than other students (UNHCR, 2020b). More specifically, research data reveal that during the school year 2019-2020 -which started before the COVID-19 effect in the Greek school system- no afternoon preparatory classes took place in the islands of Northern Aegean (Greek Council for Refugees, 2021). The same source claims that, even a year back, in the school year 2018-2019, the two thirds of refugee children between 4-17 years were left out of formal education. Nevertheless, research data point out that the Covid-19 pandemic brought to light even more inequities in health, economy and educational opportunities for refugee and migrant populations in general (Endale, Jean & Birman, 2020).

A study concerning the effect of pandemic to refugees in Germany and Turkey points out that a significant percentage of refugee children do not have access to online education (Kollender & Nimer, 2020). As regards the situation in Greece specifically, a very recent report on the refugee educational crisis in the country claims that these populations not only were left without healthcare during the pandemic, but also that education for them “has almost entirely been stopped” (Jalbout, 2020, p.10). What is more, during the first months of distance education it was estimated that half of the refugee female students attending secondary schools would not return to school when they would have the chance (UNHCR, 2020b). Although education in Greece is compulsory, which means that parents are obliged by law to send their children to school, according to Crul et al. (2019) “this is rarely applied to vulnerable groups such as refugee parents” (p.4). More data confirm that opportunities for vulnerable groups to access education in Greece during the pandemic is unequal to other groups of people (Lambert et al., 2020), due to the delayed provision of technological equipment (Anastasiadis, 2020).

Emphasizing more on the reasons behind these inequities, research has shown that learning at home entails having the digital tools needed, while this is not the case for 85% of the refugee/forced migrant students living in developing countries (UNHCR, 2020b). The study of Colucci et al. (2017) underlines the efficiency and efficacy of Free Digital Learning (FDL) for refugees and migrants, pointing out that FDL can really make a difference in refugee/migrant education, but only if we reassure those populations access to technology.

Other sources emphasize as a problem the possibility of refugee parents being “preliterate and new to technology” (Kallin, 2020), which means that they are incapable of handling digital tools to help their children -or themselves- participate in their online classes. Another study regarding a pilot program for distance language teaching to adult

refugees in Argentina revealed some of the problems that could rise in such an initiative (Corradi, 2019). The low level of language comprehension in some cases made the communication between teachers and students very challenging and students' knowledge was not properly assessed.

Nevertheless, the research proposes to solve this problem by sharing with the students a document with some basic instructions in the target language combined with icons or translation to their mother tongues. Another issue mentioned in the study was students' difficulty to connect to the internet properly or use the necessary equipment, but the worse consequence of that was just a delay at the beginning of the lesson. The last problem spotted was that learners "did not show the qualities or characteristics typically found in a language learner", as some of them had never learned another language before or felt uncomfortable when asked to interact with other students (p. 139) On account of the latter, we can find the reason behind the lack of the typical behavior if we take into consideration the definition of the word "refugees" itself; "people who have fled war, violence, conflict or persecution and have crossed an international border to find safety in another country" (UNHCR, 2020c).

Interviewing refugees living in European host countries, revealed that, for the majority of them, learning -digitally or not- comes after more important things, such as settling in the new place and solving their status problems (Colucci et al.,2017).

Bibliography

- **Alfavita. (2020b, November 17).** Shetika me deytero lockdown kleisimo ton sholeion kai tin ex apostaseos. https://www.alfavita.gr/ekpaideysi/337749_shetika-me-deytero-lockdown-kleisimo-ton-sholeion-kai-tin-ex-apostaseos?fbclid=IwAROSJh89ETQJfnwpy4IsiKqQm8F5ZZ1svD8im1RdoWTCO0ouK
- **Anastasiadis, P. (2020).** School Distance Education: Pedagogical and Social dimension. In the Proceedings of the Conference: "Distance Education and School Reality", April 2020. <https://pekesexae2020.pdekritis.gr/anastasiadis/>
- **Colucci, E., Smidt, H., Devaux, A., Vrasidas, C., Safarjalani, M., & Castaño Muñoz, J. (2017).** Free Digital Learning Opportunities for Migrants and Refugees. An Analysis of Current Initiatives and Recommendations for their Further Use. European Union.

- **Corradi, L. (2019).** Language for resilience: remote teaching of Spanish for refugees in Argentina. In G. Stanley (Eds.), Innovations in education: Remote teaching (pp. 138-141). British Council.
- **Crul, M., Lelie, F., Biner, O., Bunar, N., Keskiner, E., Kokkali, I., Schneider, J., & Shuayb, M. (2019).** How the Different Policies and School Systems Affect the Inclusion of Syrian Refugee Children in Sweden, Germany, Greece, Lebanon and Turkey, *Comparative Migration Studies*, 10(7).
<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1186/s40878-018-0110-6>
- **Digital Educational Platform e-me, (2020),** <https://auth.e-me.edu.gr/>
- **Endale, T., Jean, N., & Birman, D. (2020).** COVID-19 and refugee and immigrant youth: A community-based mental health perspective. *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy*, 12(S1), 225-227.
- **Ephimerida tis Kiverniseos tis Ellinikis Dimokratias (2020b).** Tefkhos B' 5043/14.11.2020. National Printing House of Greece.
- **Jalbout, M. (2020).** Finding solutions to Greece's refugee education crisis. Their world. <https://reliefweb.int/report/greece/finding-solutions-greece-s-refugee-education-crisis>
- Kallin, J. (2020, September 30). COVID-19 school closures amplify challenges for refugee youth. Parenting for a Digital Future. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/parenting4digitalfuture/2020/09/30/refugee-youth-during-covid/>
- **KATHIMERINI (2020, November 14).** Klínoun apó ti Deftéra óla ta skholía éos 30 Noemvríou. <https://www.kathimerini.gr/society/561157999/live-kleinoy-n-apo-ti-deytera-ola-ta-scholeia-eos-30-noemvrioy/?fbclid=IwAR0LVxCU4HTGjPU4ga2hkJZu3a04lbwUTbTKrJUDOuYDMtH>
- **Kollender, E., & Nimer, M. (2020).** Long-Term Exclusionary Effects of Covid-19 for Refugee Children in the German and Turkish Education Systems: A Comparative Perspective. Istanbul Policy Center. <https://ipc.sabanciuniv.edu/en/search-content?type=Publication&id=bdb9353c-7c8e-4991-88d3-904a722f1a04>
- **Nikiforos, S., Tzanavaris, S., & Kermanidis, K. L. (2020).** Post-pandemic Pedagogy: Distance Education in Greece during COVID-19. Pandemic through the Eyes of the Teachers. *European Journal of Engineering and Technology Research*, Special Issue: CIE 2020
<https://www.ejers.org/index.php/ejers/article/view/2305>

- **Papadimitriou, S. (2020).** The contribution of Educational Television to Distance School Education. In the Proceedings of the Conference: "Distance Education and School Reality", April 2020.
- **Skoumpopoulou S. (2021).** Refugee and Migrant Education in Greece during the Pandemic of Covid-19: Educators' Challenges, Policies and Experiences. Postgraduate Dissertation, School of Humanities, Hellenic Open University
- **Tzifopoulos, M. (2020).** In the shadow of Coronavirus. Distance education and digital literacy skills in Greece. International Journal of Social Science and Technology, 5(2). 1-14
<https://pekesexae2020.pdekritis.gr/papadimitriou/>
- **Unesco Report, Global education monitoring report, 2020:** Inclusion and education: all means all,
https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000373718?fbclid=IwAR2L8j0jirRB_oLGFDF65VEjdGnt_nTMtHOT1yb-ZFco_Z57Iobr8HO5-WXI
- **United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). (2020a).** Mediterranean situation Greece.
<https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/mediterranean/location/5179>
- **United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). (2020b).** Coronavirus a dire threat to refugee education - half of the world's refugee children out of school.
<https://www.unhcr.org/news/press/2020/9/5f4cc3064/unhcr-report-coronavirus-direthreat-refugee-education-half-worlds-refugee.html>
- **United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). (2020c).** What is a refugee? <https://www.unhcr.org/what-is-a-refugee.html>