

UDC 005.33

THE IMPACT OF SCHOOL CLOSURES ON THE QUALITY OF EDUCATIONAL PROCESS IN GENERAL SCHOOLS OF ARMENIA DUE TO COVID-19 CRISIS

ANNA ARUSTAMYAN

Public Administration Academy of the Republic of Armenia

In Armenia and all over the world, school closures and the quick transition to distance education promoted the increase in school dropouts, caused a number of inequalities among the beneficiaries of the educational process, showed that, regardless of the current situation, states should be ready for any kind of emergency having a comprehensive national strategy based on the needs of educational beneficiaries for ensuring quality and continuing education for all.

The main **aim** of this article is to introduce the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on education in general schools of the Republic of Armenia and the main challenges of distance learning during school closures; to make realistic recommendations for mitigating the impact of an emergency situation on the quality educational process.

Keywords: Covid-19 pandemic, emergency situation, quality educational process, effective distance learning, teachers, students, parents.

The role of education in human life is incomparable, as education promotes growth and reduction of poverty and inequality. Education helps people to lead a healthy life and be a full member of a society; contributes to the establishment and maintenance of peace and stability: while the role of education in emergency situations is crucial [1, pp. 11-12].

Education is a tool for protecting individuals, especially children in difficult conditions. It can be both life-saving and life-sustaining, it helps to improve psychological well-being, enhance child social-psychological resistance and recover their self-esteem [2, p. 5].

An emergency situation like the Covid-19 pandemic is a new challenge for humanity across the globe. The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in early 2020 has caused an unprecedented crisis in almost all spheres of human life around the world (economy, education, tourism, culture, etc.). It has changed the lives of people across the globe, especially the lives of teachers, students and their parents. Due to the Covid-19 crisis, schools gradually started to close to prevent the spread of the virus. Countries rapidly tried to switch to distance learning but due to the lack of connectivity, equipment, relevant teaching methods, clear understanding of distance learning, direct teacher-student interaction, it was particularly challenging for the states to ensure that all learners continue their education and avoid school dropouts.

Even before the COVID-19 shock, the world was experiencing a learning crisis. According to the official website of the World Bank, 258 million children of primary and secondary school age were out of school, and the Learning

Poverty rate in developing countries was 53 percent – meaning that over half of all 10-year-old children could not read and understand a simple text. At the peak of the global lockdown of schools in April 2020, 94% of students – or 1.6 billion children – were out of school across the globe, and, still, around 700 million students today are studying from home, in a context of huge uncertainty and with families and schools having to navigate across options of hybrid and remote learning, or no schooling at all [3].

According to UNESCO calculations, covering 180 countries and territories, evaluate that about 10.9 million students from primary and secondary levels are at risk of not returning to schools or other education institutions of which many of them are girls living in the world's least developed countries where attending school and getting an education is already a struggle [4, pp. 5-7].

Due to the outbreak of the pandemic, switching to distance education was the only option that had no alternative regardless of its effectiveness. However, it was also an attempt: the use of this kind of online learning allowed to identify all the problems and shortcomings, as well as to emphasize the advantages of offline learning. *Internet connection and technological infrastructure deficiency; limited relevant competencies; lack of experience to implement assessment and supervision in an online mode; extra workload for teachers, students and school administrators* are the main challenges that beneficiaries of the educational process faced during the school closures.

Effective distance education

The effectiveness of distance learning and educational process in general mostly depends on the relevant professional-pedagogical skills of the teaching community, the willingness of teachers to constantly improve and develop, on teachers' creative thinking, motivation to teach at school, etc.

Effective distance learning during school closures due to the Covid-19 crisis requires that teachers have proficient skills and knowledge on information and education technologies, adequate resources at home, and willingness to organize engaging lessons [5, p. 5].

Effective distance learning requires that students have basic knowledge of information technologies, have a quiet place at home for learning, presence of skills to meaningfully organize independent work, and willingness to study online.

Different international studies have shown that in order to have an effective educational system, it is important to have a highly qualified pedagogical and teaching community. The effectiveness of the education system is largely measured by the achievements of the students. And the achievements of the students significantly depend on the high professional and pedagogical skills and capacities of teachers [6, pp. 222-223].

In addition to the above mentioned, in case of distance learning we will succeed if we have:

- teachers, students and parents with basic knowledge of information and educational technologies,
- developed own special platform/portal for organizing the education process during emergency situations like the Covid-19 pandemic,

- availability of tools and methodologies for organizing synchronous and asynchronous lessons through the own special platforms/portals taking into consideration the needs of all students based on the approaches of the universal design for learning,
- accessible and detailed video tutorials on tools and possibilities of this own special platforms/portals in the native language for teachers, students and their parents,
- use of different inclusive methods and techniques aimed at promoting students' critical and creative thinking, analytical skills and metacognition during distance learning,
- control and consistency over the implementation of distance learning during emergencies.

In the framework of “Enabling Learning to Happen for All Children in Emergency Crisis” Project supported by Global Campus of Human Rights and Rights Livelihood Award Foundation “Education Preparedness Index in Covid (EPIC)” is being developed which will allow to measure and assess the educational system readiness to emergency situations and analyze the effectiveness of education policy responses during crises. This Education Preparedness Index in Covid will be tested for the first time in post Soviet countries (Armenia, Georgia, Ukraine, Moldova, etc.) With the help of this Index education policy makers could organize effective distance learning in emergencies.

Covid-19 Shock and Distance Learning in Armenia

In 2020 in early March due to the pandemic outbreak, all schools in Armenia switched to distance learning as well. The quick spread of the Covid-19 pandemic has changed the lives of school administrators, teachers, students and parents, as this is a new challenge for everyone that requires a lot of effort to overcome or to mitigate the impact of the school closures; to provide the continuity of the educational process.

School administrators very quickly started to organize and implement online lessons through the different social media applications (Viber, WhatsApp, Facebook, Messenger, etc.) and educational platforms (Google Classroom, Microsoft Office, Moodle, etc.). Lessons and educational programs were being shown on Public Television of Armenia for different school levels. An online educational platform was developed (heravar.armedu.am), where teaching materials, educational resources for distance learning were posted. A distance education center was established for organizing and implementing distance learning. “E-school Armenia” educational platform was developed during school closures where information about distance learning, video lessons for different school levels were posted. Numerous online training courses were organized for teachers on distance learning peculiarities, methods and educational technologies. The procedure for distance education has been approved, which defines the ways of organizing and implementing distance education.

Different urgent issues have been resolved for mitigating the impact of the pandemic, however, many students and teachers were not provided with the necessary conditions (digital devices, internet connection, etc.) which are the most important components of distance education. As a result of

cooperation with local and international organizations operating in the field of information technologies, the Ministry of Education, Science, Sports and Culture managed to collect about 3500 technical means, but according to the data of the Ministry, at the end of the 2019-2020 academic year, 15-20% of students were left out of the educational process due to the lack of internet connection and necessary technical equipment for switching to distance learning [7, p. 4].

In 2020, International Republican Institute has done online research on the organization and implementation of distance learning in general schools of Armenia. The main aim of this research was to collect data on the issues and challenges of organizing distance education in terms of emergency situations: 1932 teachers, 151 school principals, 558 students and 1717 parents participated in this online survey.

According to the data collected through the online survey, the transition to distance education was justified but not effective as there were many challenges that made the process difficult especially in the early stages of school closures due to the lack of relevant capacities of teachers and technical means, misconceptions about distance education. 35.2% of teachers (663 teachers) mentioned that they had passed relevant training and seminars on distance learning that help them to conduct effective online teaching. These training sessions mainly were organized by the National Center for Educational Technologies of the RA. In addition to this, many other training courses were held for teachers by the local and international organizations, in which again the same teachers participated.

Distance education was organized leaving aside children with special needs and disabilities, children living in remote rural communities. Different means were used for providing the continuity of education: according to the opinions of students and teachers, lessons and educational programs shown via TV were not effective due to the time and content (both distance lessons and educational programs through Public Television started at the same time) [8, pp. 5-13].

Studying the existing situation in general schools of rural and urban communities of Armenia (134 schools), we identified the most common issues that the beneficiaries of the educational process faced during the school closures due to Covid-19:

- 47.5% of teachers of general schools in Armenia did not have the necessary skills and adequate equipment at home (23% of teachers) to organize and conduct effective distance learning. The reasons for that are the lack of motivation for self-learning, the old and traditional methods of organizing lessons, lack of professional training, seminars, discussions on distance learning, etc. Very often by saying distance learning, many teachers understand the use of social media applications (like Viber, WhatsApp, Messenger, Zoom, Skype, etc.) requiring students to use these apps as well, to participate in distance learning. **Figure 1** presents the descriptive statistics for the use of above mentioned platforms and social media apps. The use of social media applications causes great difficulties, as a result of which it is not possible to conduct quality and interesting lessons with effective time management. Leaving aside the opportunity to use a number of different

platforms/portals for organizing distance learning, teachers often prefer difficult and not effective ways due to which many students remain out of the educational process. So, social media applications are not designed for organizing and conducting online lessons, they can only be temporary solutions.

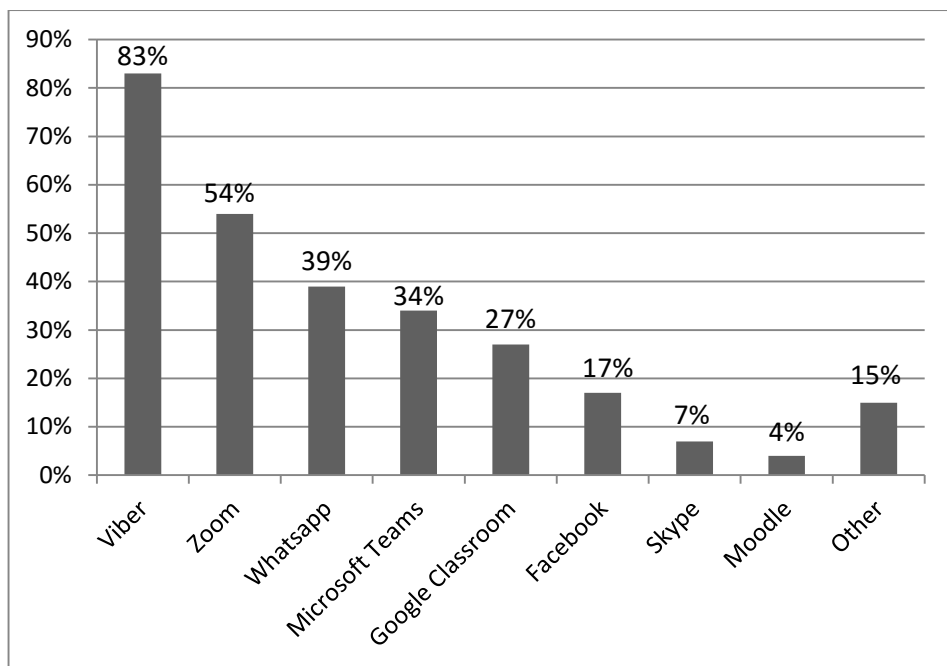


Figure 1 - What platforms did you use for conducting your online lessons during school closures? ¹

- There was not a clear understanding of distance learning among students as well, so they also faced many problems during school closures. In some schools especially in remote rural communities the regular and practical use of information technologies have not been accessible to students for different reasons (see **Figure 2**): absence of necessary information technologies, the age of the teacher, the teachers and administrators did not show any consistency to constantly encourage the continuous growth of students' knowledge and skills in the field of information technology. In addition, many students did not have a quiet place at home (room, desk, computer, etc.) in order to be able to engage effectively in the educational process. Also, the inconsistency of the platform chosen by the teacher sometimes promotes the dropout of students from the learning process.

¹ The figure is based on the data from an online survey done by the author.

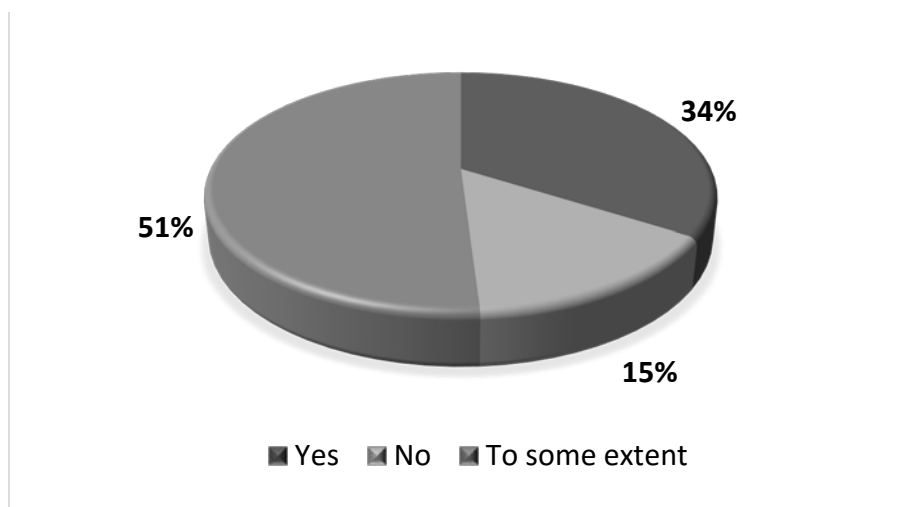


Figure 2- Do you feel confident to use a digital device (computer/telephone/tablet) for your learning purposes? ¹

- Students with disabilities and special needs together with their parents had the greatest difficulties in switching to distance learning. Due to the lack of institutional methodology and a clear educational policy, they were not able to participate in remote learning fully, as the methods and existing educational technologies of the proposed learning process were not available to them. The vast majority of students with disabilities and special needs already had difficulties at school and were among the disadvantaged and vulnerable. During distance learning the existing inequities sharpen and the effective implementation of inclusive education goes into the background.

- Many parents have incomplete stereotypes about distance education, often not encouraging distance learning as an engaging way of education citing a number of objective-subjective reasons. The parents who have never been involved in distance education are unaware of the intricacies of the educational process, and often think that connecting students to 30- or 40-minute courses via Viber, WhatsApp, Messenger, Zoom, etc. is already a component of distance education. Many students, without technical means for personal use, often had to use their parents' computers, phones, and other technologies and, as a result of which they often could not switch to classes on time because their parents were at work, etc.

Coming to the conclusion we suggest the following actions be taken for mitigating and/or overcoming the impact of emergency situation:

- To develop a comprehensive national educational strategy for current and future emergency situations based on teachers and students' needs, which will help to organize a quality educational process for the beneficiaries of the educational process,

¹ The figure is based on the data from an online survey done by the author.

- To develop and introduce clear mechanisms for measuring and evaluating the effectiveness of the organization and implementation of distance education during the current and future emergency situations.
- To fund and conduct a comprehensive monitoring of the use of informational and educational technologies in general schools of Armenia to identify gaps and organize relevant trainings, seminars for school administrators, teachers and students.
- To equip schools with information technologies, as a result of which it will be possible to provide teachers and students with appropriate digital devices at school. As transition to distance education came to prove, that education of the 21st century without the use of information technology could not and can not have the desired result.
- To organize distance learning for students with disabilities and special needs at home in emergency situations ensuring that teachers and/or multidisciplinary team members observing safety rules visit their home.

REFERENCES

1. **Nicolai Susan**, “Education in Emergencies A toolkit for starting and managing education in emergencies”. Save the Children. 2003, 152 pages.
2. INEE. “Minimum Standards for Education in Emergencies, Chronic Crises and Early Reconstruction”. DS Print. 2004, 78 pages.
3. Official Website of the World Bank:
<https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/immersive-story/2021/01/22/urgent-effective-action-required-to-quell-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-education-worldwide>. Accessed April 20, 2021.
4. UNESCO. “COVID-19 Education Response, How Many Students are at Risk of not Returning to School”. Advocacy paper, 30 July 2020, 23 pages.
5. **Phan, Thanh Thi Ngoc, Ly Thi Thao Dang**, “Teacher Readiness for Online Teaching: A Critical Review”. 2017, 16 pages.
6. **Arustamyan Anna**, “The Role of Teachers in Assurance of Efficient Quality Management in Education”. Quarterly Journal Alternative. October-December 2019, 8 pages.
7. **Ավետիսյան Անի**, «Հեռավար կրթությունը Հայաստանում. մարտահրավերներ ու հնարավորություններ». Օրբելի կենտրոն. 21 օգոստոս 2020, 15 էջ:
8. Միջազգային հանրապետական ինստիտուտ. «Պետական հանրակրթական ուսումնական հաստատություններում հեռավար/առցանց կրթության կազմակերպման և իրականացման վերաբերյալ առցանց հարցման ամփոփ արդյունքներ», 2020, 14 էջ:

ՔՈՎԻԴ-19 ՃԳՆԱԺԱՄՈՎ ՊԱՅՄԱՆԱՎՈՐՎԱԾ՝ ԴՊՐՈՑՆԵՐԻ ՓԱԿՄԱՆ ԱԶԴԵՑՈՒԹՅՈՒՆԸ ՀԱՅԱՍՏԱՆԻ ՀԱՆՐԱԿՐԹԱԿԱՆ ԴՊՐՈՑՆԵՐՈՒՄ ԿՐԹՈՒԹՅԱՆ ԳՈՐԾԸՆԹԱՑԻ ՈՐԱԿԻ ՎՐԱ

ԱՆՆԱ ԱՌՈՒՍՏԱՄՅԱՆ

Հայաստանի Հանրապետության պետական կառավարման ակադեմիա

Հայաստանում և աշխարհում դպրոցների փակումը և հեռավար կրթության արագ անցումը նպաստեց դպրոցից դուրս մնացած աշակերտների թվի աճին. այն առաջ բերեց մի շարք անհավասարություններ կրթական գործընթացի շահառուների շրջանում. ցույց տվեց, որ անկախ ներկա իրավիճակից, պետությունները պետք է պատրաստ լինեն ցանկացած տեսակի արտակարգ իրավիճակի՝ ունենալով համապարփակ ազգային ռազմավարություն, որը հիմնված կլինի կրթության շահառուների կարիքների վրա՝ երաշխավորելու բոլորի համար որակյալ և շարունակական կրթություն:

Հոդվածի նպատակն է ներկայացնել Քովիդ-19 համավարակի ազդեցությունը կրթության վրա Հայաստանի Հանրապետության հանրակրթական դպրոցներում, և անդրադառնալ դպրոցների փակման ընթացքում հեռավար ուսուցման հիմնական մարտահրավերներին, ինչպես նաև ներկայացնել իրատեսական առաջարկություններ՝ մեղմելու արտակարգ իրավիճակի ազդեցությունը կրթական գործընթացի որակի վրա:

Բանալի բառեր. Քովիդ-19 համավարակ, արտակարգ իրավիճակ, որակյալ կրթական գործընթաց, արդյունավետ հեռավար ուսուցում, ուսուցիչներ, աշակերտներ, ծնողներ:

ВЛИЯНИЕ ЗАКРЫТИЯ ШКОЛ НА КАЧЕСТВЕННЫЙ ОБРАЗОВАТЕЛЬНЫЙ ПРОЦЕСС В ОБЩЕОБРАЗОВАТЕЛЬНЫХ ШКОЛАХ АРМЕНИИ ИЗ-ЗА КРИЗИСА COVID-19

АННА АРУСТАМЯН

Академия государственного управления Республики Армения

В Армении и во всем мире закрытие школ и быстрый переход на дистанционное обучение способствовали росту числа учащихся, бросающих школу; это привело к ряду диспропорций среди бенефициаров образовательного процесса; показали, что, независимо от текущей ситуации, государства должны быть готовы к любым чрезвычайным ситуациям, имея комплексную национальную стратегию, основанную на потребностях получателей образования, для обеспечения качественного и непрерывного образования для всех.

Основная цель этой статьи - представить влияние пандемии Covid-19 на образование в общеобразовательных школах Республики Армения, а также основные проблемы дистанционного обучения во время закрытия школ; дать реалистичные рекомендации по снижению влияния чрезвычайной ситуации на качество образовательного процесса.

Ключевые слова: COVID-19 пандемия, чрезвычайная ситуация, качественный образовательный процесс, эффективное дистанционное обучение, учителя, ученики, родители.

*Ներկայացվել է խմբագրություն 15.04.2021
Երաշխավորվել է տպագրության 23.05.2021*