



EDUCATION IN TIMES OF PANDEMIC

RESEARCH REPORT

THE EFFECT OF COVID-19 GOVERNMENT MEASURES ON THE EDUCATION SECTOR IN NORTH MACEDONIA



The project is financed
by European Union



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MACEDONIA**

Artan Limani, PhD

EDUCATION IN TIMES OF PANDEMIC - The Effect of COVID-19 Government Measures on the Education Sector in North Macedonia

ORIGINAL TITLE:

ОБРАЗОВАНИЕ ВО ВРЕМЕ НА ПАНДЕМИЈА - Влијанието на мерките на Владата на Република Северна Македонија за справување со КОВИД-19 врз секторот образование

PUBLISHER:

Foundation Open Society – Macedonia

FOR THE PUBLISHER:

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TRANSLATION FROM MACEDONIAN LANGUAGE:

Abakus

CIP - Каталогизација во публикација

Национална и универзитетска библиотека «Св. Климент Охридски», Скопје

37:[616.98:578.834(497.7)(047)

LIMANI, Artan

Education in times of pandemic [Електронски извор] : the effect of COVID-19 Government Measures on the Education Sector in North Macedonia: research report / Artan Limani. - Skopje : Foundation Open society - Macedonia, 2021

Начин на пристапување (URL): <https://eur01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.dijalogkoneu.mk%2F&data=04%7C01%7C%7C871355053c56441095fe08d96890563d%7C6dd6692964ee4888a65ab847baf12c47%7C0%7C0%7C637655791403821997%7CUnknown%7CTWFPbGZsb3d8eyJWljoimC4wLjAwMDAilCJQJjoiV2luMzliLjJBTiil6IkIhaWwILCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C1000&data=pttjrQl1uROz04lSt4a%2FpDXXs465t19Nd4EGD0ZdWRM%3D&reserved=0.>

- Текст во PDF формат, содржи 49 стр. - Наслов преземен од екранот. - Опис на изворот на ден 26.08.2021. - Превод на делото: Образование во време на пандемија

: влијанието на мерките на Владата на Република Северна Македонија за справување со Ковид-19 врз секторот образование. - Фусноти кон текстот

ISBN 978-608-218-336-7

а) Образование -- Ковид-19 -- Пандемија -- Мерки за справување -- Македонија -- Извештаи

COBISS.MK-ID 54771461

This publication was produced with financial support of the European Union. Its contents are the sole responsibility of the author and do not necessarily reflect the view of the European Union.

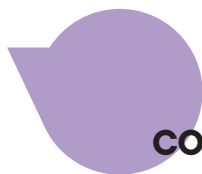
The fight against COVID-19 will last for years and will necessitate a coherent systemic approach. What had started as public health crisis inevitably triggered educational and socio-economic implications in the society. Hence the need to develop *reports on measures adopted to tackle the crisis caused by COVID-19 and their impact on health and education sectors and socio-economic policies at national and local level*, which will not focus on one sector, but will contribute to development of comprehensive systemic solutions.

Even at times of declared state of emergency, citizens should be in the centre of crisis management actions, while adequate solutions must be designed at community level. By the nature of their work, CSOs are very close to their communities, especially to marginalized groups. In order to create the most adequate response to emerging conditions due to the pandemic, CSOs are encouraged to network their capacity and to self-mobilize within the structural dialogue at local and national level. On that account, the EU-funded project “CSO Dialogue – Platform for Structural Participation in EU Integrations” announced an open call for development of 6 reports concerning measures adopted to tackle the COVID-19 crisis and their impact on health and education sectors and socio-economic policies at national and local level. The purpose of these research papers is to identify and to assess adequacy of measures adopted by the Government of RNM during the declared state of emergency, to support researchers and civil society organizations operating at local and national level, to increase the pool of evidence-based information and to strengthen capacity of civil society organizations for participation in sector policies at times of crisis, but also to strengthen and to promote the structural dialogue between institutions and the civil society.

We believe that reliable institutions and informed, consulted and conscious citizens and civil society organizations are able to re-design the approach, to evaluate the crisis and to anticipate the recovery. Through the prism of impacts from implemented policies, this publication contributes to mitigation of consequences from the COVID-19 crisis for citizens.

The project “CSO Dialogue – Platform for Structural Participation in EU Integrations” is implemented by the Foundation Open Society – Macedonia, in partnership with the Center for Civil Communications (CCC), Eurothink – Center for European Strategies and Reactor – Research in Action, and is financially supported by the European Union.

One of the project’s overall objectives is to increase the civil society impact in the country’s accession to the EU, by means of evidence-based policy creation and development of policy briefs on key sector and reform policies within the EU accession process. For more information about the project, visit the website: www.dijalogkoneu.mk.



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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to thank colleagues from the Foundation Open Society – Macedonia, Nada Naumovska and Goran Lazarov, for entrusting me to conduct this comprehensive and authentic research project on a national level. Their trust and respect were foundational for concluding the project successfully. In addition, I would like to thank fellow researchers, Iva Mihajlovska and Natasa Boskova, on their excellent cooperation in designing the specific methodology for all three target sectors – education, healthcare, and socio-economic. A heartfelt gratitude goes to Borjan Gjuzelov, my fellow researcher who conducted the study on a local level. Borjan and I worked tirelessly to design the specific research approach we carried out at the local school. He also served as a great consultant for the project at the national level and never hesitated to suggest interesting ideas and approaches, through which both research projects were completed.

I would also like to thank all stakeholders in the education sector, across the country, who committed time to meet with me, either in person, online, or talk over the telephone. Special gratitude goes to Dusan Tomsic from the cabinet of the Minister of Education who coordinated the meetings with employees at the Ministry of Education and Science and the Bureau for the Development of Education. Additionally, enormous appreciation goes for all mayors, heads of education sectors within municipalities, school directors, school administrators, teachers and students who not only found time to participate in the long interviews, but also provided authentic value to this research project. I must admit that I learnt a great deal from the time spent with teachers and students. Their involvement in the system itself is remarkable.

Finally, a heartfelt thank you to the municipal secondary school in Gostivar who allowed us to become part of the school and learn from their work. From all the time spent together (onsite, online, and over the phone), we learnt a great deal. Through their participation in the study, this analysis has gained a unique value that may certainly be utilized for future studies in the field of education. Similarly, the research methodology employed in this context could serve other researchers well, particularly when it comes to specifying the target population in potential research settings.



ABBREVIATIONS

RNM	Republic of North Macedonia
MES	Ministry of Education and Science
BDE	Bureau for Development of Education
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
OECD	Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development

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INTRODUCTION

1.1. About the project

This research project aims to assess the relevance of the measures implemented by the Government of the Republic of North Macedonia as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, and to determine their effect, on a national level, within the education sector. Moreover, the study aims to provide a support infrastructure for researchers and civic organizations who are planning to pursue similar work on a local or national level. Finally, the research aims to enrich available evidence-based information and strengthen the capacity of civic organizations to participate in policy-making, during pandemic conditions caused by Covid-19. The ultimate goal of this research endeavor is to promote and enhance dialogue between institutions and the civil society.

Specific objectives of this research project are:

- ▶ to determine whether there is satisfactory public availability of information on the measures adopted during COVID-19 and whether they have been adopted in a transparent manner
- ▶ to assess whether the adopted measures are relevant to the Covid-19 crisis and whether an impact assessment has been carried out;
- ▶ to determine the degree of utilization of the measures for dealing with COVID-19, adopted on a national level
- ▶ to assess the degree of involvement of civil society organizations and the role of sectoral working groups in creating measures to deal with COVID-19

The objectives of this research project are authentic and offer an added value to the whole set of analysis and research in the education sector by relevant local and international organizations. The analysis provides comprehensive findings on the challenges of the educational system in the country. It also offers a clear outlook on the model MES had adopted to manage the crisis within the sector. On a national level, the project examines the model MES had implemented while creating the measures, whose obvious purpose, apparently, is the continuation of teaching in a digital format from a distance, without com-

promising the quality of education that students were getting through physical presence at school. It is evident that by shifting teaching into an online format chances for spreading the virus within the school itself would decrease, therefore it would be logical to expect that the overall professional capacity of MES would be concentrated on providing support to the schools to offer good quality digital education from a distance. The purpose of this project is to also examine whether ad hoc working groups were established that included civic organizations, non-formal groups, independent experts, school directors, teachers, students, and parents.

Similarly, on a national level, the project assessed the level of cooperation between MES and mayors, who as foreseen by law, are legally bound to supervise the educational process within their municipalities. Each municipal administrative unit includes an education sector, led by a mayor's appointee who is expected to provide expert and administrative assistance to all schools, as well function as a liaison between schools and the mayor on daily basis. This project also analyzed and assessed the quality and level of communication on a municipal level; from mayors all the way to school directors, coordinated by the heads of education sectors within municipalities.

Inspired by Sir Ken Robinson, the author of the bestseller "Creative Schools", on a local level, the research was narrowed down to observing and scrutinizing the operation of a municipal secondary school, during COVID-19 conditions. The aim was to assess the effect of adopted measures on the school, but also to undertake an authentic analysis of the organizational culture within the school. It was important to acquire an understanding of the value system the school had created and assess how all that impacts students and the learning process. According to Sir Ken Robinson, in order to increase the quality of students' educational experiences and improve their chances of success in life, a lot of effort must be put into creating a good school culture within a school. In a school with a vibrant culture which offers a combination of mentoring, art, physical education, academic skills and more, participants thrive. In other words, Sir Ken Robinson believes that when schools go so far as to create a solid in-school work culture, they become a true asset for the community itself or for the ecosystem as a whole. This particular aspect adds research value to the analysis and, as such, assesses the impact of the school and teachers on the local community itself.¹

1.2 Education in the Republic of North Macedonia

The pandemic caused by the coronavirus changed the discourse of life and work. For the first time in recent history, the entire economy was closed. Although the millennial generation, remember the partial curfew from 2001, for

1 Robinson, K. & Aronica, L. (2015). Creative schools: The grassroots revolution that's transforming education. Penguin Books. New York.

Generation Z this is a completely unique situation. However, due to the fact that they are digital natives and organize their lives mainly through their digital devices, they were not utterly unprepared to pursue a digital regime. In the Republic of North Macedonia, this generation is not different from that in European countries, in terms of the level of acceptance of the digital realm in the lifestyle; yet, due to the high level of poverty, access to digital technology is limited for many citizens, including youngsters from the digital generation. In 2015, nationally, 21% of citizens of the Republic of North Macedonia lived below poverty line. For contrast and comparison, in 2000, the population that lived below poverty line was at 22%. In 2018, on the other hand, the percentage remained almost the same [21,9%].²

Despite the socio-economic inequality in the country, our generation Z is part of the global digital generation. This means that any child who has access to digital devices will be able to navigate with them. None of the previous research on education during the pandemic found that students lacked the skills to use digital devices. On the contrary, the pandemic only accentuated the inequalities among citizens, in big part due to inadequate social policies. These inherently lead to inequity among students, hence a dysfunctional education system in the country. The complications in the education system during the pandemic expanded even more because schools and teachers did not have enough resources for teaching via distance. In the Republic of North Macedonia, 40% of the population lives in rural areas, and on the other hand 25% of the population lives in the capital.³ This data could help us infer why many schools were not connected to the Internet and the reason they were not equipped with computers and other digital devices. This is also an argument for the inequity between students living in the capital and those living in rural areas. The capital city, by far, offers better technical possibilities and commonly students from the capital have access to digital devices, particularly because of the higher level of employment among citizens. In rural areas, in addition to experiencing technical difficulties, including but not limited to internet access or a stable electricity grid, these people often live in or below the poverty line.

According to the OECD, the country's smaller ethnic communities live in rural areas. For example, ethnic Albanians live in the northwestern part of the country, while due to poverty which is more prominent in rural areas, inequity and the gap are more noticeable. The poverty rate of the Roma community, for example, is three times higher than the national average.⁴

Inequity in a society is not solely a result of inadequate social policies. It is likely

2 The World Bank. Poverty & Equity Brief. North Macedonia. April 2020. Available at databank.worldbank.org

3 The World Bank. Primary Education Improvement Project (P171973). Project Information Document (PID). 28 September, 2020. Available at documents1.worldbank.org. (Accessed on 06.03.2021).

4 OECD. CHAPTER 1. THE EDUCATION SYSTEM IN THE REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA. 2019. Available at oecd-ilibrary.org. (Accessed on 25.03.2021).

due to poor policy development vision across sectors, including the education sector itself. A long-term development strategy in education would be a smart way to start reimagining education as a whole. School autonomy could be an excellent starting point, but above all, a thorough and comprehensive strategy for reforming higher education would set the development agenda on the right path. It is an already established fact that almost all teachers come through the higher education system in the country which, as such, makes it central to any reform in the system itself. Investment plans in education allowing for professional development of teachers and school directors should be designed timely and comprehensively, allowing all teachers and directors to achieve benchmarks for development. This, along with the strategy for complete school autonomy, could result in better student outcomes both in school and in the real world. Lack of investments and budgeting in the education sector could be demonstrated with the following data: Namely, in 2016, the Republic of North Macedonia allocated only 3.7% of the country GDP to the development of the education sector while between 2011 and 2016 this amount was 4.6%.⁵ If we compare North Macedonia's commitment to educational development with investments in other countries, we shall realize that in 2017, Germany allocated 4.9%⁶ of their GDP while the average in OECD countries is 4.2%.

Percentage doesn't do much justice in this comparison as the two country budgets are not even comparable in the total amounts of funds they aggregate per capita; nevertheless, it is still important to comprehend that, despite all the challenges that the education system in the country is facing, we continue to persistently disregard investments in it. Digitalization of learning in public schools should have happened since 2010, at the time when Google announced their online learning tools would be available for free to public or non-profit schools. Had schools implemented Google learning tools timely, by now they would have been able to confidently provide hybrid learning opportunities, where 30% of the teaching and learning materials would have been presented through the platform in an asynchronous way. This would have provided on-the-job professional development for teachers and schools in times of normal day-to-day activities and would have prepared them to use online learning tools in times of a major disruption. Most importantly, the missed opportunity to timely adopt technology for use in teaching and learning (e.g. 2010), has hindered the opportunity to create digital authentic materials, which would have already been uploaded online in portfolio formats for each and every class.

Although we are living in the time of the Fourth Industrial Revolution and in the age of the Internet of Things, children and youngsters in the country face a shortage of digital devices and have weak or no internet access in schools.

5 OECD. CHAPTER 1. THE EDUCATION SYSTEM IN THE REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA. 2019. Available at oecd-ilibrary.org. (accessed on 25.03.2021).

6 The World Bank. Government expenditure on education, total (% of GDP) – Germany. Available at data.worldbank.org. (accessed on 12.04.2021).

The irony is that in our public schools we have students who have applications on their smartphones that allow them to control the air conditioning systems in their homes, while at school they are not provided access to quality digital education. Despite all of this, lack of school leadership, poor national vision for school reform, and lack of digital pedagogy skills among teachers, hinders the opportunity for schools to implement a school-wide digital education.

Nevertheless, the digitalization of schools and digital skills among teachers and students require a set of abilities. Specifically, the standard digital classroom requires teachers to be researchers, so that they can create digital lessons in which students will actively participate during class and outside of it. This means that teachers and professors should have a solid knowledge of English language, but also possess intellectual competencies that will enable credible selection of materials and their argumentation in front of students. In order to offer a class in a digital format, the same needs to be planned accordingly, both in a synchronized and asynchronized form, because in only 30 or 35 minutes of a synchronized class, very little can be discussed and applied. A typical classroom context in a local school, usually involves more than 30 students. As a result, teachers' skills in curriculum and syllabus is central. This takes us back to the previous argument that the need for an all-inclusive reform of higher education, which is the main provider of teachers to the system, is more than essential. Specifically, reforming the faculties of pedagogy, apart from the overall higher education system, is an essential need.

On the other hand, in order to fully implement digital learning, hybrid or solely via distance, in addition to digital knowledge, students must also possess learning skills. A good knowledge of English is also crucial for students because digital learning requires a lot of reading materials that are downloaded from the Internet and are usually found in English. Additionally, research skills, selection of credible materials, ability to work in groups and teams, problem-solving skills, and presentation skills, are critical. Furthermore, students are required to possess solid academic writing skills to avoid plagiarism, as well as skills to evaluate their own work and the work of their peers during project development.

The above-mentioned elements are a fundamental part of any efficient education system; hence they must be integrated in every school. To do that, a reform of the entire education system in the country is necessary; however, it must be done devotedly and strategically. First of all, citizens must be involved through civil society organizations or as independent experts, in order to assure inclusiveness and comprehensiveness of the process itself. On the other hand, through the involvement of civil society organizations in the education sector, citizens will be provided with first-hand insights into important reform processes. For example, the Ministry of Education and Science has requested a \$25 million loan from the World Bank to execute the new concept in primary education, which is currently being drafted and is scheduled to start from September 2021.

For a new concept to be effective, it is of particular importance to ensure that schools can independently, under the guidance of school directors, implement these new programs and ensure quality improvement in each new academic year. In this regard, there is skepticism as to whether school directors demonstrate sufficient managerial skills to provide professional support for teachers to improve their skills for working in 21st century schools.

Even the educational systems of developed countries were tempted. Of course, they did not face problems of the same nature as in North Macedonia; yet, interruption happened everywhere. The General Secretary of the United Nations (UN), Antonio Guterres, stated that *“The World faced a generational disaster that could destroy big human potential, a decade of progress and increase the inequality gap.”* He also predicted, however, that this disruption of the educational system is, at the same time, an opportunity for all countries to redesign the model of education they have been implementing, into a new one based on the present state, but inspired by the future. According to him, this would also be helpful for the accomplishment of the 17 sustainable development goals⁷ of the United Nations. North Macedonia has a serious share and determination as a UN member-state, NATO member-state, and EU candidate-country. Very little time is available until 2030, and the Republic of North Macedonia must make a serious step forward and reform key sectors to contribute to the accomplishment of the 17 UN sustainable development goals, on a global level.

1.2.1 Data on education in the Republic of North Macedonia from relevant international organizations

The pandemic caused a complete collapse in the educational system in the Republic of North Macedonia. The already fragile system even before the pandemic, suffered tectonic oscillations as a result of the same. The World Bank, in its October 2020 Human Capital Index, reports that the system has “poor educational outcomes” (page 5).⁸ Moreover, the index presents a rather worrisome reality in which a child in North Macedonia is normally expected to complete 11 years of pre-primary, primary, and secondary education by the age of 18. Nonetheless, compared to the quality of education children receive, the index depicts that they only complete 7.3 years of education. This established fact through the study concludes that children in North Macedonia leave school with an educational gap of 3.7 years.⁹ The reflection offered by this research

7 United Nations 17 Sustainable Development Goals. Available at sdgs.un.org/goals. (accessed on 25.04.2021)

8 Human Capital Project, North Macedonia. Human Capital Index 2020 in The World Bank. Primary Education Improvement Project (P171973). Project Information Document (PID), 28 September, 2020. Available at documents1.worldbank.org. (Accessed on 06.03.2021).

9 Human Capital Project, North Macedonia. Human Capital Index 2020, October, 2020. Available at data-bank.worldbank.org. (Accessed on 06.03.2021)

provides a clear illustration of the state of the education system in the country at the time the pandemic hit. In order to assess the effects of an external influence, it is very important to previously establish a context for the status of the system.

The initial World Bank Report¹⁰ refers to the USAID 2017 EGRA and EGMA report¹¹, which indicates that the level of oral literacy, such as reading and comprehension, in children from second and third grade in North Macedonia, is significantly lower compared to international benchmarks. Their tests also showed that there are inequalities in the system itself, where children attending classes in Macedonian language show better results than children attending classes in Albanian and Turkish languages. The USAID report indicates that such results are primarily owed to the lack of resources at home and at school and to insufficient time devoted to effective learning. Moreover, the report indicates that teachers and school directors have no incentive to offer better learning conditions while learning programs are strict and overloaded, which makes them unsuitable for the learning capacity of students. Similarly, teachers do not individualize their teaching while students who do not show enough progress and positive results do not receive adequate learning support.¹²

Inequality and inequity in the education system in the Republic of North Macedonia are also presented through the results in mathematics that students received through the EGMA test conducted by USAID in 2017. Namely, the report states that better results were attained by students whose parents have completed higher education, as well as students studying in the capital, in urban schools. Similarly, the report depicts attainment of higher results by students who study in classes only with children from the same grade level, those who have attended preschool, as well as those who possess books at home.¹³

Similarly, low PISA-results from 2018 indicate that difficulties in knowledge acquisition for students in North Macedonia start from an early age and persist until the beginning of secondary education. These generally poor results attained by students on the PISA testing “put them in an unfavorable position compared to their peers” (page 6). These results also point to inequities among students. For example, students from families with higher income perform better compared to those from families with lower income, according to the World Bank report.¹⁴

10 The World Bank. Primary Education Improvement Project (P171973). Project Information Document (PID). 28 September, 2020. Available at documents1.worldbank.org. (Accessed on 06.03.2021).

11 USAID, 2017. Nationwide Study of Early Grade Reading and Mathematics Assessment in the Republic of North Macedonia. In: The World Bank. Primary Education Improvement Project (P171973). Project Information Document (PID). 28 September, 2020. Available at documents1.worldbank.org. (Accessed on 06.03.2021).

12 The World Bank. Primary Education Improvement Project (P171973). Project Information Document (PID). 28 September, 2020. Available at documents1.worldbank.org. (Accessed on 06.03.2021).

13 Ibid

14 Ibid

Finally, the report highlights the influence of Covid-19 on the learning process in general, stating that despite all efforts to manage the sector through various measures, a huge learning loss is expected to occur. The report indicates that the system will be in dire need of a comprehensive revitalization after the crisis. This is mainly a case since schools were left to manage learning during the crisis on their own, while teachers, on the other hand, were not ready to deliver quality online learning opportunities to students. Inevitably, a learning gap is expected as a result with an enormous learning loss. Specifically, the report indicates that a systemic mishap was allowed by officials, despite the awareness of the fragility of the education system and the inequity within it.¹⁵

The coronavirus pandemic has only exposed the many shortcomings of the system for adopting and implementing digitalization in the learning and teaching process. In addition to the inequalities and disadvantages of marginalized groups and students from low-income families, the World Bank report suggests that students coming from vulnerable groups in the society may face even more learning loss, as a result of this major shock for the education sector due to the pandemic. The report suggests that the number of students below the minimum PISA competency threshold, could increase from 55% to 64%.¹⁶

The OECD survey from 2019 provides additional valuable insights along similar lines. Their report indicates that the National Education Strategy of North Macedonia (2018–2025) focuses on substantive actions, but does not have sufficient mechanisms to achieve the goals and monitor them. The report also estimates that the lack of professional capacity and the uncoordinated data system, weaken the Ministry's ability to set and monitor policy objectives. The education system of the Republic of North Macedonia has a limited operational capacity mainly because the professionals working in different sectors within the Ministry do provide technical expertise, but do not possess sufficient resources and leadership support.¹⁷

Decentralization in the Republic of North Macedonia allows municipalities to manage primary and secondary schools and initiate establishment of new ones. Legal reforms have made this possible for municipalities, but according to an OECD report, the reform did not provide for capacity development for managing education. Many municipalities have only one person appointed to lead the education sector and, in that regard, they neither have sufficient human nor material resources. Managing schools suffers from a similar deficiency. Through the legal possibility of establishing school boards, who appoint school directors and adopt annual development school program, schools are actually provided

15 Ibid

16 Ibid

17 OECD. CHAPTER 1. THE EDUCATION SYSTEM IN THE REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA. 2019 Available at oecd-ilibrary.org. (Accessed on 25.03.2021).

de jure autonomy. Nevertheless, as the report states, mayors always have a political preference, limiting the possibility of full involvement of the board in the process. It is also stated that due to the lack of appropriate training, the board does not have the capacity to perform the task.¹⁸

As a result, reforms in the education sector should focus on reforming schools from an organizational and operational perspective. Similarly, teachers should be provided with comprehensive and measurable professional development program, while curricula should be designed while focusing on developing multidisciplinary skills among students, whose values and attitudes will reflect their exemplary citizenship later on in life. In other words, the overall school reform should focus on enhancing its impact on each student experience through the cultivation of a holistic development and by intensifying the influence of the schools within the local and regional communities. Correspondingly, the World Bank report indicates that the reform of the education system in North Macedonia should focus on “empowering schools to become the nexus of institutional change, improving national assessment systems, putting into action recently developed professional competencies, and strengthening sector-level fiscal efficiency” (p.9)¹⁹

1.3 Research conducted by national and international organizations on the effect of Covid-19 on the educational system in the Republic of North Macedonia

To explore the shortcomings and specific challenges faced by primary schools during the Covid-19 crisis, Metamorphosis Foundation based in Skopje deployed an authentic research project to “identify the conditions and challenges of online teaching in primary schools in the Republic of North Macedonia in the period between March and June 2020” (page 2).²⁰ Results from this study revealed that the education system in North Macedonia faced a number of challenges, which besides being of a technical nature, they also touched on the pedagogical aspect as well. From a technical perspective, the report indicates that 44.5% of participants in the study had no access to computer technology and as many as 84.9% used private e-mail addresses for work tasks. Lack of internet access in schools was reported by 31.6% of the respondents, who stated that they had accessed the world wide web through their mobile devices. On the other hand, from a pedagogical point of view, lack of clear guidelines

18 Ibid

19 The World Bank. Primary Education Improvement Project (P171973). Project Information Document (PID). 28 September, 2020. Available at documents1.worldbank.org. (Accessed on 06.03.2021).

20 Foundation Metamorphosis, Conditions and Challenges for Implementing Online Teaching in Primary Schools. Research Report. September 2020. Available at metamorphosis.org.mk. (Accessed on 20.03.2021).

for managing an electronic portfolio was reported by 82.4% of the respondents in the study, while 85% claimed to have experienced deficiency of clear and supporting guidelines for assessment in online teaching.²¹

Results from the study determine that in order to deliver successful online teaching in our country, continuous technical support is compulsory, which is established by as much as 97.1% of respondents. Additionally, 88.9% of the respondents claim that for successful online teaching, the methodology should include new approaches and strategies, for which comprehensive training should be offered. What is more, as many as 30% of the participants think that, compared to the MES offered centralized online learning platform, a better option would be to allow for schools to autonomously choose a platform suitable for them. Lastly, results from this research claim that there is lack of educational resources and learning materials, especially when instruction is implemented in another language, other than Macedonian.²²

In the period between July and August 2020, UNICEF, with the support of UKaid, MES, and BDE, executed by Reactor, a local Think Tank based in Skopje, conducted a survey with school directors, teachers, parents and students, in order to learn about their experiences and attitudes on online teaching and learning. Through a combined quantitative and qualitative research approach, robust feedback was received from primary and secondary schools in the country. This research is one of the most important in the range, particularly because it was conducted during the second semester of the school year, right when the pandemic started and when the education system was faced with the unprecedented challenge. The project adds value to the overall argument that the underdeveloped education system, whose students complete their education with the lowest learning outcomes in Europe and beyond, is fragile and has huge gaps and deficiencies.²³

The same study reports that during the entire period of the crisis, including the second semester of the 2019/2020 academic year, “there was no systemic approach and clear guidelines” from the Ministry of Education and Science. Specifically, the study reports that teachers did not receive any support or instructions from the Ministry for delivering distance education. They assert that were left unsupported by relevant institutions. On the other hand, parents claim that teachers have gone above and beyond to provide instruction to their students; which has been positively noted by parents. Specifically, the study reports that 32% of parents are happy with how teachers managed instruction, during extraordinary educational circumstances. On the other hand, 59% of

21 Ibid

22 Ibid

23 Reactor – Research in Action. EXPERIENCES AND OPINIONS RELATED TO DISTANCE LEARNING: Combined findings with school directors, teachers, parents and students. July-August 2020. Report received from UNICEF, Skopje.

parents provided a worrisome assessment for school directors, school administrators, and student support services. They all received a grade of 1 out of 5. Overall, on a school level, the distance learning process delivered to students was assessed with an average grade of 2.9, whereas on a national level, parents assessed the distance learning experience by their children with an average grade of 2.7.

The study conducted by Reactor reaffirmed OECD's findings from 2019 which established that smaller ethnic communities have much less chance of progress in the education system, as a result of greater poverty among those groups.²⁴ Specifically, the study determined that students from Roma families did not have access to digital devices in order to engage in communication with teachers and classmates. Referring to a single mother from the Roma community, the study spotlights a daughter who was not granted access to work in a group with her classmates because she did not have a digital device to connect.

Ultimately, learning from home or via distance, according to the study conducted by Reactor, proved ineffective. 38% of respondents claimed that the model implemented was partially effective, while 19% reported that learning was partially ineffective. To sum up, 24% of the total number of respondents (N=122) reported that learning through this particular model was rather ineffective. As a figure, it makes it factual that the education system in the Republic of North Macedonia faced difficulties of a basic operational character.²⁵

2

REVIEW OF MEASURES DEVELOPED BY MES AND BDE ON DEALING WITH THE PANDEMIC

2.1. Measures created to aid the function of primary and secondary schools in Covid-19 conditions

This research analyzes all documents designed to serve as measures and guidelines to stop the spread of coronavirus, hence the COVID-19 pandemic, in the period from March 11 until December 1, 2020. The Government of North Macedonia, the Ministry of Education and Science, and the Bureau for the Development of Education, drafted several documents in the format of protocols, plans, decrees, and algorithms, for the purpose of assuring smooth operation of the

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ Ibid

learning process within the education sector. For the purpose of this research, documents in the above-mentioned formats were collected through the initial interviews at the Ministry of Education and Science with primary and secondary education sectors. The aim was to receive a clear understanding of the general goals and objectives of these documents. To avoid a technical examination, a proper content analysis was performed while connecting keywords and phrases obtained during the interviews with sector leaders within the ministry.

One of the objectives of this research was to analyze interinstitutional cooperation and review the channels through which these measures (documents) traveled to reach the schools. It is obvious that the education sector is much more complex compared to other sectors because, according to the law, municipalities appear to be founders and administrative units for schools. Logically, the Ministry of Education and Science and the Bureau for Development of Education would need to send the measures to each elementary and high school, through the education administrative unit within each municipality. This systemic structure makes the educational system very complex and particular for our country. Subsequently, this research, apart from analyzing the measures themselves, looks into the inter-institutional cooperation to see how measures were communicated with particular schools and whether the whole process happened in an inclusive and transparent manner.

To answer the questions of this authentic research, documents will be analyzed in the form of decrees and protocols which provide critical support to the pervasive theme created through the process of defining the research methodology as well as through the feedback received from all stakeholders in the educational sector during the initial interviews.

In the plan for teaching and learning in primary and secondary schools, published in the Official Gazette No. 254, attachment No. 51, from October 22, 2020, the following is stated:

“The plan of the Ministry of Education and Science to start the school year 2020/2021 is based on the need to assure maximum benefits for students, teachers, the school staff, and the wider community, but at the same time to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in the country. In addition to the fundamental right to education, another basic human right is the right to health. This plan provides guidelines on the protocols that primary and secondary schools should follow to provide the necessary protection measures, hence reduce the risk of spreading the coronavirus (COVID-19)”²⁶

26 Official Gazette of RNM No.: 254/2020, Decree on the addition of the Decree on the Method of Organizing and Implementing Teaching in Conditions of Emergency in Primary and Secondary Schools from 22.10.2020.

The purpose of this kind of an analysis is to extract a common theme from all the documents developed as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. Based on the above-mentioned extract, it can be determined that the general goal and the overarching theme across all documents analyzed for the purpose of this research, was to provide protection for all schools and to reduce the risk of spreading the coronavirus. Nevertheless, several documents which are specifically created by the Bureau of the Development of Education aim to provide pedagogical and methodological guidelines for schools in order to aid them through the teaching and learning process, amid the crisis. From an expert point of view, the right to good quality education is as important as the right to health, therefore the review and analysis of the measures is conducted by investigating whether the same level of significance is attributed to both elements when measures were initially designed. Additionally, apart from the measures, this research scrutinizes their implementation at randomly chosen schools, in three different regions in the country. More specifically, the aim is to assesses their influence from a health aspect, but also from the aspect of quality education in times of a pandemic. The general topic that is prevalent within the measures and the general motivation guiding the working groups at MES and BDE will be presented through an analysis of all documents and decisions released by relevant institutions in the education sector, from March 11, 2020 until December 1, 2020.

On March 12, 2020, the Government of North Macedonia administered a decision and implemented measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19, through which it prohibited the operation of all primary and secondary schools. The decision also involved all kindergartens, centers for early childhood development and day-care centers. Teaching in higher education institutions and scientific institutes was cancelled as well. This government decision enforced closure for all dormitories, libraries, theaters, cinemas, museums, and playgrounds. Furthermore, the same decision prohibited attendance of all extracurricular activities and other private activities that children performed after school.²⁷

On March 23, 2020, the Government of the Republic of North Macedonia adopted a decree with legal force for the application of the Law on Primary Education during a state of emergency, in which Article 2 emphasized that all operations in primary schools are organized via distance by implementing digital communication devices. Similarly, in the same governmental session, a decree with legal force was adopted for the application of the Law on Secondary Education during a state of emergency, in which Article 2 of the decree stated that all high school educational operations should be delivered online or via distance. Additionally, in this session, a decree was adopted with legal force for

27 Official Gazette of RNM No.: 62/2020, Government of the Republic of Macedonia, Decision on Measures for Preventing the Spread of Coronavirus COVID-19 from 12.03.2020.

the application of the Law on Higher Education, which foresees the methodology of delivering and implementing university curricula. Article 2 states that all three cycles of higher education institutions and scientific institutes, shall be performed via distance, using electronic means of communication. Testing and examinations was foreseen to be carried out via distance using online communication, as well.²⁸

Higher education in our country is regulated by a special Law on Higher Education, where Article 3/(2) (Basic Principles of Higher Education) states that activities in higher education are based on, among others, autonomy and academic freedom.²⁹ Though higher education was legally bound to move online and deliver classes via distance, it was done so by the government to prevent the spread of coronavirus. Nevertheless, the government of North Macedonia and the Ministry of Education and Science did not create any further protocols, instructions, or guidelines, for higher education institutions as they are considered autonomous and enjoy complete academic freedom to decide on the most adequate methodology of delivering online education thus assuring quality of scientific application and knowledge acquisition. Due to these categorical facts, higher education institutions are not part of this study.

With the aforementioned decisions, the overall educational system in the country was put in a dire position, making it clear to all stakeholders that the system will face an unprecedented challenge. When the disruption took place, the school year was in the last trimester with two months and twenty days left until the end of the academic year. Considering that physical attendance at school was practically impossible, the Bureau of the Development of Education adopted a *Guideline for Teachers for Assigning Grades*, hoping that the document will aid teachers in assigning grades via distance in order to successfully complete the school year. This document is registered under No.: 12-4217/1 dated March 30, 2020, archived in the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Macedonia.³⁰ The guideline is one of the five documents developed by BDE intended to assist schools with providing professional support mechanisms for delivering quality education via distance. The guideline for teachers for assigning grades, among other details and directions, contains the following information for teachers:

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- 28 Official Gazette of the RNM No.: 76/2020, Government of the Republic of North Macedonia, 1220 decree with legal binding to the application of the Law on Primary Education during State of Emergency; 1221 decree with legal binding to the application of the Law on Secondary Education during State of Emergency; 1222 decree with legal binding to the application of the Law on Higher Education during State of Emergency dated 24.03.2020.
- 29 Official Gazette of the RNM No.: 82/2018, Parliament of the Republic of Macedonia, Pronouncement of the Law on Higher Education dated 8.5.2018.
- 30 Guidelines for Teachers on the Method of Assigning Grades to Students in the Period of Implementing Distance Teaching and Learning. Available at bro.gov.mk (Accessed on 03.03.2021).

“Formative assessment, as it is generally known, requires greater interaction between students and teachers, while in terms of teaching via distance, the interaction is achieved through electronic platforms ... In order for formative assessment to be applicable, teachers need to use the above approaches and methods in order to enable students to explore, set goals, collaborate with classmates, communicate, and think in terms of real-life situations ... ”

There are a number of techniques and methods suitable for formative assessment of student progress, using electronic platforms and networks. These include tasks such as:

- ▶ Essay questions (via e-mail);
- ▶ Project development (group work);
- ▶ Skype or Viber discussions (or discussions through other networks and platforms);
- ▶ Multimedia presentations;
- ▶ Poster Developments (group work);
- ▶ Projects/Research assignments (group work);
- ▶ Progress tests (can be delivered via social networks, e-mail or through any other platform);
- ▶ Progress check exercises (can be delivered via an electronic platform, social networks, or e-mail), and
- ▶ Creating student e-portfolios (page 5)³¹

It is important to note that apart from the aforementioned, no other guidelines or protocols destined to assist schools with distance learning were created during this period. This is the only document listed as central for the period between March-August 2020, intended to aid schools with generating grades for students.

The next document, created by the Sector for Monitoring and Evaluation of the Achievements of Students and Teachers at BDE, was released to school directors on August 21, 2020, intended for the professional development of teachers. The document instructed teachers to register for the online training on “Teaching Through Implementing ICT Learning Tools.” This document invites all teachers to join the BDE Learning Management System (LMS) and provides directions on how to connect. In the BDE administration, this document is archived under number 11-835 /2.³²

³¹ Ibid

³² Bureau for Development of Education, Professional Development for Teachers. Document No.: 11-835/2 from 21.08.2020. Available at bro.gov.mk. (accessed on 24.02.2021).

The series of documents intended to serve as instructions and guidelines, is accompanied by the “Guidelines on Distance Teaching Methodology in Primary and Secondary Education” which was designed to standardize the preparations for online teaching, lesson plan development, and classroom resource selection. Moreover, the document provides resources that the National Platform for Distance Teaching (NPDT) offers in order for teachers to implement quality instruction from distance. Fundamentally, the document provides technical instructions; nevertheless, it encourages teachers to maintain a higher level of motivation among students while encouraging safeguarding of the socio-emotional aspect of each child. Similarly, this document was created and intended for use in the new school year 2020/2021.³³

The Bureau for the Development of Education (BDE) had also developed a document to serve as “Guidelines for the Implementation of Shortened Curricula in Primary and Secondary Education,” as a result of the government’s decision to start the new 2020/2021 academic year on October 1, 2020. The document contains a series of instructions for planning and implementation of teaching within 30 minutes per class in primary education and 35 minutes for classes in secondary education. Specifically, the document provides structured guidelines for teachers, in both referred levels of education, to implement when preparing lesson plans in accord with the time allotted. Guidelines spotlight suggestions that teachers and schools should make efforts to find similarities among different subject matters taught within the same curricula in order to integrate those topics within single classes. This is to help schools avoid repetition of topics and assure time efficiency to meet the 30 and 35minute threshold.³⁴

In order to administratively cover the entire education system, BDE had prepared a document with instructions for the implementation of extracurricular activities for primary schools, via distance. The document provides instructions and guidance for teachers on how to carry out extracurricular activities while assuring that students’ social and emotional wellbeing is kept intact. This was conducted in line with the latest amendments to the Law on Primary Education, as a result of the COVID–19 pandemic. This guide offers a range of resources, which are part of the National Distance Learning Platform, and suggests technical solutions offered by the platform for organizing workshops, student drives, and activism regarding the participation of students in school parliaments and classroom governance bodies.³⁵

33 BDE Guidelines on Distance Teaching Methodology in Primary and Secondary Education. Available at bro.gov.mk. (accessed on 15.02.2021).

34 BDE Guidelines on Implementing Condensed Curricula in Primary and Secondary Education. Available at bro.gov.mk. (Accessed on 17.02.2021).

35 BDE “Guidelines on Implementing Extra-curricular Activities through Distance Learning Platforms in Primary Education”. Available at bro.gov.mk. (Accessed on 23.02.2021).

The Bureau for the Development of Education had also created a document titled Guidelines for the Implementation of the Teaching of Elective Classes in Primary Education in the academic year 2020/2021. The use of modern and avant-garde educational concepts is prevalent in this document as well.

“The new pedagogy” of online learning implies solid understanding of the learning process itself and its connection with innovative approaches through implementing digital technology. For elective classes, the introduction of new content is recommended to be no longer than half of the foreseen time of the lesson, which in this particular case is 15 minutes. As for the rest of the time, teacher should engage in communicating with students on topics that are relevant and of interest to them in that particular class, or for providing additional explanations, self-evaluation, or feedback.” (page 1)³⁶

Clearly, through this document, BDE aims to assist schools in the implementation of elective classes, through shortened programs and less available time with “innovative pedagogical approaches” (page 1).³⁷

The last in the series of guidelines produced to assure normal operation of the educational system, while at the same time assure delivery of quality pedagogy in times of a pandemic, is the “Instruction for the Implementation of Teaching in Special Primary Schools and Public High Schools for Students with Special Educational Needs in the Academic Year 2020/2021”. This guideline aims to regulate the teaching of “students with special educational needs or, more specifically, students with disabilities who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments” during emergencies (p. 1). The document regulates the manner of organizing classes for special needs students and enables special primary schools, special classes within primary schools, and state secondary schools for special educational needs students, to flexibly adapt curricula according to the individual needs of each student. The document specifies that teaching in these schools shall be implemented with physical presence, in line with the submitted request to the Government of North Macedonia. Ultimately, the document provides guidance to schools in the planning and implementation of teaching for students with special educational needs on some of the key methodological and didactic strategies, which are deemed helpful for the successful implementation of teaching in these particular units.³⁸

On the other spectrum of documents generated to technically regulate the process of teaching and learning in schools during the pandemic, is the Teaching Plan for Primary and Secondary Schools for the 2020/2021 school year. This document presents the protocols needed to be implemented by primary

36 Ibid

37 Ibid

38 BDE “Guidelines on Teaching in Special Primary Schools, Special Classes in Primary Schools, and State Secondary Schools for Pupils with Special Educational Needs in School Year 2020/2021. Available at bro.gov.mk. (accessed on 18.02.2021).

and secondary schools to protect students, teachers, and administrative staff from Covid-19, thereby assuring a safe teaching process. Specifically, the document provides clear directions for teaching in municipal primary and secondary schools and state primary and secondary schools founded by the Government of the RN Macedonia. The document specifies that primary schools may regulate teaching combined by physical presence and distance learning. For an illustration, it is suggested that students from first to third grade attend onsite classes, unless a parent requests a child to attend classes online. The document explicitly notes that onsite teaching is allowed only for the schools that fulfill all conditions and have requested procedural permission from the Government of North Macedonia.

Alternatively, secondary vocational schools, art schools, sports schools, and sport academies implemented a combined method of teaching and learning whereby general education classes were delivered online, while vocational and practical classes were implemented onsite, in accordance with the enforced protocols for secondary schools, as approved by the government. The document also specifies that teachers must deliver online classes from schools, while on the other hand, school directors have an explicit obligation to secure fast and stable Internet access and suitable technology for teaching.³⁹

The Ministry of Education and Science has prepared two protocols which were intended to regulate onsite teaching and learning in primary and secondary schools on a national level, for the 2020/2021 school year. The protocols provide technical guidance to regulate daily school procedures. In accordance with the protocols, schools should administer body temperatures to each student entering the school, ask students to disinfect their hands and shoes, enforce the wear of masks, and maintain physical distance among students and between students and teachers. Both protocols are accurately designed to ensure maximum safety from the spread of coronavirus among students. Namely, it is noted that physical contact between teachers and students is prohibited and the note goes to the extent that prohibits physical greetings by all parties. The procedure also encompasses barring parents' entry into schools, while all employees are instructed to hold meetings through conference connections. The number of students per classroom is capped at a maximum of 20, with maintaining a physical distance of at least 1.5 meters between and among individuals.^{40/41}

39 MES. "Plan for teaching in primary and secondary schools in school year 2020/2021. Available at mon.gov.mk. (Accessed on 01.03.2021).

40 MES. Protocol for managing primary schools in the Republic of North Macedonia for implementing the teaching process with physical presence of students in school year 2020/2021. Available at mon.gov.mk. (Accessed on 03.03.2021).

41 MES. Protocol for managing secondary schools in the Republic of North Macedonia for implementing the teaching process with physical presence of students in school year 2020/2021. Available at mon.gov.mk. (Accessed on 03.03.2021).

The Ministry of Education and Science also created an algorithm for schools, instructing them to deal with cases when students show symptoms, are suspected of having the virus, or even appear to be Covid-19 positive. The guideline regulates the procedure for further administering students who show symptoms, are suspected of Covid-19, or prove to be Covid-19 negative.⁴² Additionally, schools are provided with the COVID-19 report form in order to provide weekly informative summaries on their COVID-19 circumstance.⁴³

3 METHODOLOGY

To answer the questions stemming from the objectives of the research, this study implemented a qualitative methodology, specifically developed for the context. Namely, the purpose was to receive an authentic understanding of the process of developing measures, their dissemination, and their impact on schools. This was achieved through analyzing the experience and perspectives of key stakeholders across the country. In order to obtain original findings, the research approach was qualitative, which included in-depth interviews with a carefully selected target group in the educational sector. Considering the authentic goals of this research, it was essential to establish a contextual relationship with the target group through open discussions in order to set the agenda for the prevalent questions on the educational process. The purpose of these strategic discussions was to generate as much content as possible to help answer the general research questions. Every interviewee targeted to participate in the research was provided with a set of personalized semi-structured questions, in order to reach out to the very essence of the education sector they were engaged in.

Meeting times, the duration of the interview, and the model of carrying out the discussion were mutually agreed between the researcher and the interviewee, for the purpose of obtaining authentic feedback on their experience and perspectives. This approach allows interviewees to become part of the agenda setting and take ownership over the quality and reliability of information provided.

As public servants, stakeholders from the educational system are, more or

42 MES. Algorithm for managing schools in cases of students with symptoms, suspected students/students positive for COVID-19. Available at mon.gov.mk. (Accessed on 04.03.2021).

43 MES. COVID report of the school. Available at mon.gov.mk. (Accessed on 04.03.2021).

less, exposed to numerous interviews and research conducted by organizations or independent researchers. As a result, there is a probability this process to become a routine part of their work and subsequently, the received feedback from the target group not to be comprehensive and of good quality. Hence, the strategy employed included a period of a 15-minute pre-interview with a free discussion on the topic. During this period, the researcher centered the discussion around the importance of such research in the educational realm, in the particular national context, and drew attention to the practical use of any kind of authentic results obtained. Simultaneously, throughout these discussions, the researcher established personal and professional credibility by elaborating ethical values applied by the research itself, as a prerequisite for successful implementation of in-depth interview.

On average, one interview lasted between 45 minutes and 1 hour, excluding the introductory conversations that lasted no less than 15 minutes. It is important to mention that the interview with the Teachers' Union lasted 1 hour and 20 minutes. Also, the focus group with students from three regions in the country lasted for 1 hour and 30 minutes.

The target group for this research was carefully selected, in line with the project information and the general and specific objectives of project. Regarding the authenticity of the research, the target group was selected through careful analysis of the system and review of previous research, in order to avoid overlap with other studies. Similarly, the study maintained authenticity by assuring not to replicate other research projects conducted in the country and the region. The size of the target group proved appropriate, while the three regions selected for research were appropriate to supply with robust information to draw conclusive, reliable, and valid results.

Such an approach enabled this research to be augmented with a whole set of evidence-based information supporting the arguments of all civic and international organizations through authentic findings. On a central level, participants in this research were heads of sectors for primary and secondary education at MES, representatives from the Bureau for the Development of Education, representative from the Teachers' Union, and representatives from two civic organizations. On a local level, the study included a rural municipality from the Polog administrative region (including the sector for education and a primary school), two urban municipalities as administrative units (including the sector for education and two secondary schools) from the Eastern and Pelagonija region, and one focus group with students from all three regions. In-depth interviews were also conducted with civil society representatives from the same regions to get an inclusive outlook that involves all stakeholders in the sector. Finally, three interviews with teachers were conducted through telephone for reasons

imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

By applying the above-mentioned approach, the methodology allowed for a successful conduct of the research in the education sector, as one of the most complex in the whole public sector. On a national level, 16 interviews and one focus group with students from the three specified regions were conducted. Overall, the research covered a solid part of the educational system through which robust findings were made available. The goal was not only to answer the research questions, but to also offer an authentic overview of the context generated from overall research experience. On a national level, the research questions and the overall objectives of the research directed the project to attend to administrative procedures and approaches applied by key actors involved in managing the COVID-19 crisis. These actors included heads of sectors within MES and BDE (key personnel in charge of policy development), mayors, heads of education sectors within municipalities, and school directors, as the last layer in the administrative funnel, in charge of implementing measures within their schools.

In order for this research to be inclusive and to fully reflect the education system, a case study was conducted on a local level. The goal of this study on a specific local context was to add value to the national project and add research significance through data from a particular school setting. The reason for this is twofold. Namely, the feminist organizational theory of Patrice M. Buzzanell⁴⁴ asserts that the most authentic and reliable information is obtained from vulnerable and generally marginalized groups or individuals in a system. According to this, the projection was that the best way to get a comprehensive and inclusive outlook of the system is to conduct an analysis through in-depth interviews at a specific municipal high school in the country. Correspondingly, for a complete implementation of the methodological approach for this research, the study was conducted in combination with an ethnographic approach at a secondary municipal school in Gostivar. It is one of the most diverse cities in the Republic of North Macedonia, which reflects the multicultural and multiethnic character of the country. Nevertheless, at the same time, this approach offers an all-inclusive depiction of the educational practices carried out at a school level, both in normal conditions and in times of crisis.

The research was conducted in such a way that the researchers became an integral part of the school during a whole working day. The research at the school continued for over a period of several days, but due to the pandemic, it took place online through ZOOM. This allowed the researchers to obtain answers up close, through comfortable conversations with administration, staff, teachers, and students. This approach also provided researchers with a general

44 Patrice M. Buzanell. Faculty, Department of Communication. University of South Florida. [usf.edu](https://www.usf.edu)

impression of the impact and mission of the school in the community itself, as well as the value of the teaching profession in the local community. As mentioned previously, this additional approach was inspired by Sir Ken Robinson. In his New York Times bestseller *Creative Schools: The Grassroots Revolution That's Transforming Education* (2015), he asserts that schools become an important asset for the community, only when they get their culture right. According to him, "great schools enrich the entire neighborhood, the entire ecosystem, but schools that don't get their role in the community can drain the life force out of the community."⁴⁵ This school provided a wholesome depiction of its influence in the local community, but also of the position of its teachers, students, the school director, and their commitment for a better and more democratic society. Finally, through the school culture they had created, they provided an understanding of the synergy and the support they offered to one another during the crisis.

To a large extent, participants and organizations part of this research shall remain completely anonymous, in order to assure ethical compliance with national and international standards.

4 FINDINGS

Through the in-depth interviews at the Ministry of Education and Science, the aim was to generate an understanding of the methodology implemented for the creation of the measures themselves, their public availability, and to check whether ad hoc working groups were created, which included civil society organizations. During the onsite interview, it was easy to understand that heads of sectors were invested in their work and were familiar with sectoral issues, in general. Interview questions were clear to them and they provided exhaustive answers each. This was indicative of the long experience of heads of sectors with issues regarding the complexity of the system, both in primary and secondary education.

From the interview conducted with the primary education sector, it became evident that, despite the work invested in creating the measures, their sole role of was to "implement the protocols."⁴⁶ Part of the interview investigated if there

45 Robinson, K. & Aronica, L. (2015). *Creative Schools: The Grassroots Revolution That's Transforming Education*. Penguin Books, New York.

46 Interview with Head of Primary Education Sector conducted on 17.02. 2021, at MES.

was a follow-up activity by them to assess the relevance of measures created. It was explicitly pointed out that such an operation was not carried out in a systematic way; nonetheless, according to the head of sector, it was obvious that the measures were effective and “well designed” as they managed to prevent the spread of the virus to a larger extent among students and teachers.⁴⁷ Yet, MES did not create an ad hoc expert group that would serve as a center for managing or coordinating the quality of teaching from the day of starting online learning. According to them, this part was not on their domain.

“*That part is under the jurisdiction of the Inspectorate. Similarly, school directors are in charge of assuring and measuring quality.*”⁴⁸

The Primary Education Sector had not developed an operational plan for emergency deployment, although the sector administers 362 schools on a national level. The large number of primary schools under the supervision of the sector is certainly quite complex, while during emergency situations, it becomes even more complicated and with greater needs. Apparently, measures were sent via e-mail to the mayors, while Viber was used for their implementation.

“*See... this was a mayor on the phone... I am in constant contact with them over the phone or via the Viber chat group.*”⁴⁹

The Ministry of Education had not performed an analysis of the performance of school directors, who are in charge of managing the quality of teaching and learning. The head of sector asserted:

“*That question should be directed to the mayors. Nevertheless, we believe that the protocols were clear for school directors.*”⁵⁰

One of the objectives of this study was to provide a clear outlook on the whole process of developing measures, their implementation, and public availability. It is evident that public accessibility of the measures is sufficient since they can be found on the websites of MES, BDE and on koronavirus.gov.mk. Similarly, the Official Gazette page of the Republic of North Macedonia is publicly accessible so all decrees and laws can be easily accessed online. The measures, however, were created for very specific target groups within a single sector. In other words, they were created to assist the educational process delivered via distance and to protect teachers and students from Coronavirus infections.

47 Ibid

48 Ibid

49 Ibid

50 Ibid

Despite the great zeal and work invested in developing the measures, MES had not conducted a standard assessment and scrutiny to understand whether measures were beneficial and whether they were fully implemented.

“We have not conducted such an assessment, but we do receive continuous feedback from mayors”.⁵¹

The interview with the department of secondary education was conducted via ZOOM. The representatives of this sector appeared to be well aware of the complexity of the education system in general and of the secondary education in particular. The representative of the department provided robust information from the sector itself. The high school education system in the country consists of a total of 110 municipal and state secondary high schools, out of which only 23 are in Skopje (79.09% vs. 20.91%). This figure shows that a significant number of high schools are located in smaller urban areas across the country, a fact that has led this study to focus on high schools outside of the capital city.

A comparable work approach was implemented by the high school sector, paralleled with the sector in charge for primary education. Similarly, this sector had not created an action plan for work in emergency circumstances, which would closely monitor the teaching process, in close collaboration with the school directors and teachers across schools. After an exhaustive period of creating a solid number of measures and sending them by e-mail to the mayors, hence to high schools, they too did not conduct an assessment to cross check if the documents reached every school. Most notably for this study, the sector did not implement a standardized assessment to measure the impact of the documents they created on schools and the education process itself. This is a standard procedure and it should happen after a certain period of time, in order to receive feedback on the hard work invested in creating those documents. When asked about this particular procedure, the sector administrator asserted:

“We did not conduct such an assessment. Maybe UNICEF implemented something like that”.⁵²

Undoubtedly, the purpose of these documents was to help maintain the educational process intact during an emergency, while minimizing the spread of the virus. Nonetheless, it would be daunting that the sector would not attribute the relevance of quality of teaching and learning to the previously noted objectives of the documents. According to the representative of the sector, the initial goal of all documents developed by MES was to protect children and teachers from the virus and the COVID-19 disease. On the other hand, it is evident to this study that the measures created by BDE are focused on securing assistance

51 Ibid

52 Interview with the Secondary School Sector at MES, conducted on 26.02. 2021.

for the schools from a pedagogical aspect. Nevertheless, it's very logical that for protocols and guidelines created for schools, authors would seek to receive a follow-up feedback to test the relevance and efficiency of the documents. Particularly, this is appropriate in instances when authors of such documents are not part of the school system but are rather physically detached from day to day activities within schools.

“We have not done an impact assessment to see whether the measures were relevant for schools and whether they were helpful in times of crisis.”⁵³

Finally, sector representatives stated that they did not conduct an official evaluation of the competence of school directors as key actors in charge of implementing the measures. Similarly, the sector reported not to have conducted an analysis to gauge if measures adopted for secondary schools were useful and whether they were fully implemented.

As specified above, measures developed by BDE are rather pedagogical and methodological and aim to maintain quality of teaching and learning via distance. Moreover, BDE contributed to the development of the National Platform for Distance Learning that, unfortunately, did not prove operational and useful in the long run. BDE representatives claimed that they provided their suggestions about what the platform needed to offer, from a conceptual perspective. Training was organized for teachers via master-trainers selected by MES and BDE. This was defined in one of the decrees created by BDE (see footnote 29) reaching out to all teachers to invite them to participate and acquire skills for delivering distance education. Above all, this measure is vital to cushion the stress the overall educational system faced since the pandemic hit. Subsequently, this study seeks to discover whether or not an evaluation of the training was performed, both in the short and long-term.

“After the training they attended, participants completed an evaluation form to provide their input on their experience, but we do not have the results.”⁵⁴

The Bureau for the Development of Education received feedback immediately after the training, through a questionnaire in an electronic form, but oddly enough, they don't have the results. This is enough of a signal that there is a flaw in the system itself. That particular feedback is crucial and in a standard organizational procedure could be used for conducting analytical comparisons with the efficacy of the distance learning system. This is a standard operation in educational management of a large scale such as the one BDE is conducting.

Similarly, there is no data on any follow-up conducted to assess the useful-

⁵³ Ibid

⁵⁴ Interview with a representative from BDE conducted on 09.03.2021.

ness of the Guidelines for Teachers on the Method of Assigning Grades to Students during distance teaching and learning (see footnote 30). The interviewed administrator at BDE indicated that they had not made such an assessment, but suggested that UNICEF may have conducted it. The rich and extensive UNICEF report, which is part of the desk research of this study, does not present such data.

The Bureau for the Development of Education, as a central agency within the Ministry of Education and Science, played a central role from the beginning of the pandemic until the beginning of the new school year 2020/2021. The measures they had created are extensive and textually rich with avant-garde features of modern pedagogy. Through a textual analysis of all documents created by them, it was notable that they had suggested use and implementation of modern trends in pedagogy, although no footnotes and/or references were provided. For example, the Flipped Classroom concept is not originally invented by the BDE, hence it is compulsory that references are provided for it, in order that teachers and principals can access the source directly and read more about it. This would also respect the intellectual property of the author or the organization that initially invented and designed the concept. For example, a primary school director from a rural municipality was completely unfamiliar with the concept, thus said:



“This document was received by the Education Sector of the municipality. I read it but it seems like I did not pay attention to that concept. No, I do not know what it means.”⁵⁵

The Bureau for the Development of Education had not conducted an analysis on school needs during the time of an emergency and distance learning. Similarly, BDE had not carried out a systematic assessment on the impact of the measures on the education system, which they initiated and authored. What is more, they had not performed an assessment to understand if the measures they implemented were relevant to the crisis and appropriate for online learning.

Beyond all, civic organizations working in the sector, were not invited to get involved in creating the measures. As key stakeholders who have experience and expertise in the domain, they could have provided a significant contribution to creating quality and applicable measures, whilst also assuring inclusiveness of the process. Nevertheless, CSO's in the sector, besides being only a few in number, reported that they had not been part of any particular work group in charge of creating measures, as a result of the crisis. What is more, they were not even part of their dissemination or implementation along schools in the country.

55 Interview with a school director of a primary school in a rural municipality in the Polog region, conducted on 19.03.2021.

Administrators interviewed at the Ministry of Education and Science and BDE, claimed that they did not involve any civil society organization in the sector for the creation or implementation of measures, decrees, guidelines, or protocols. A representative of a CSO from the education sector, which operates in a rural municipality in one of the regions, said:

“Neither the organization nor I have any information about measures created by MES or BDE. Neither have they sent anything, nor were we invited in any expert group to work on them.”⁵⁶

“They could have at least sent the documents and ask us to help disseminate and implement them in schools. We work with primary schools on different projects and we know exactly where we can help. We would have analyzed the measures and organized trainings for the schools of this region so that they could have been implemented. We know all school directors in primary schools who, unfortunately, are not fit enough to lead with the education process in general.”⁵⁷

Two civic organizations from the capital city that were part of this research identify themselves as organizations that could offer expertise in the education sector. They are ready to help MES at any time with all their capacity, especially in times of crisis. These two organizations generally cooperate with MES and identify themselves as partners working on the level of particular work groups in the ministry, or sometimes through providing consultations and recommendations for specific school programs.

As far as measures are concerned, in the form that they are selected for this analysis, the two organizations claimed that they had not received them via official channels or directly from MES or BDE. Generally, both organizations were acquainted with the measures adopted for re-organizing teaching and protecting teachers and students from the threatening virus. Nevertheless, they were not acquainted directly and had not engaged in analyzing each document per se. For example, they were not aware of the document which was created to serve as a guideline for assigning grades to students via distance learning (see footnote 30). The executive director of one of the civic organizations stated that he did not have the document and was not familiar with its contents. Additionally, the same organization was not involved in **any** work group for developing measures, decrees, or guidelines.

“Unfortunately, we were not involved in the development of measures, formally within a work group or on any sitting committee together with the institutions for the creation of these documents. Still, we do cooperate with MES and BDE,

56 Interview with a director of a civic organization from a rural municipality in the Polog region, conducted on 26.03.2021.

57 Ibid

*but that is within the framework of a particular project, not cooperation on this domain.*⁵⁸

*“Since the pandemic started, our relationship with the Ministry has been reactive, i.e. we have reacted when a measure or document was adopted by them. We were not involved in the creation of those documents or measures, including organizing teaching in these extraordinary circumstances or for setting standards for distance learning.”*⁵⁹

CSOs specializing in the education sector are very important for the whole context they operate in and not only for assuring inclusiveness in the process of managing crisis situations. In general, they closely cooperate with schools across the country and in many rural regions. Their involvement in creating measures in times of crisis can have plenty of positive characteristics. The first positive characteristic is that it would contribute to the quality of the measures themselves; particularly due to the comprehensiveness and inclusiveness of the process, where organizations are given a share and they take ownership over the process. The second positive characteristic is that, by and large, this inclusive approach contributes to the democratization of the society. Most importantly, as a third characteristic, CSO's could assist in the implementation of regulations, protocols and guidelines, through their close working relationship with school directors and teachers themselves.

One of the two CSOs operating at the central level, stated that it had been involved in creating the concept on distance learning in May and June of 2020. This is a milestone both for this project and for the democracy of the country, because at least one of the important documents generated during the crisis, has the seal of a civic group. This organization estimates that, in general, the Ministry of Education and Science is in support of partnership with CSO's; nevertheless, the concept of partnerships is not yet systematically defined and included in the standard operation of the ministry and the entire system in the country.

*“Without vanity, rivalry and with constructive criticism and involvement of stakeholders, experts, non-governmental organizations, institutions ... Organizations need to specialize on specific sectors in order to assist in improving public policies ... only then can we improve education in our country.”*⁶⁰

In order to reach the schools, the study was channeled to scrutinize municipalities, mayors, and the education departments within municipalities. Namely, in North Macedonia, according to the existing Law on Decentralization, municipalities emerge as the formal founders of primary and secondary schools.

58 Interview with the executive director of a civic organization operating on central level, conducted on 16.03.2021

59 Ibid

60 Interview with a representative of a civic organization operating on a central level, conducted on 15.03.2021.

Due to this legal constellation, municipal authorities were key target groups in this analysis. The aim was to determine their role in creating the measures, the channels through which they received them, and the means they used to disseminate them to the directors, hence each school.

All measures, in the form of guidelines, regulations, plans, decrees and calls, created at the central level, were generally sent via e-mail. Though this information was initially obtained from the creators of these documents (MES and BDE), mayors, school directors, and heads of education sectors confirmed the same again. Nonetheless, this specific topic of discussion and analysis was not much anticipated by municipalities and school directors. In other words, they did not anticipate that a researcher will scrutinize the dissemination and implementation of measures in schools. In one of the municipalities, the impression was that the topic had not been discussed much among stakeholders at the local level. On the other hand, administrators at the Ministry of Education and Science and BDE, knew almost all details of all the measures created. In other words, in this specific rural municipality there was a constant tendency to shift the conversation to a more general discussion about education and the technical issues faced by municipalities in the sector. At one point, when the discussion was focused to a specific document, the mayor replied:

“Which measures, which document? Here’s the Viber-group (showing his phone) and look at the documents that I receive in this group! Only one document has been sent as a pdf file and that is not about education. We have no assistance, thus very little communication with MES.”⁶¹

“Maybe this document (Guidelines for teachers on the manner of assigning grades to students in the period of distance teaching, i.e., learning from home) was sent via e-mail in March 2020. We should check our emails!”⁶²

The documents sent to this municipality were not central during the crisis. The mayor, the head of the education department, and the school director, who jointly attended the meeting, did not recognize most of the documents presented to them. Generally, it was notable that a very positive work environment was dominant in this municipal administration and there was good cooperation among all entities involved in the process. However, the pandemic had put them in despair as they felt neglected by the central government and with very little human and material resources. The mayor was well aware of the factual situation with the education configuration in the municipality and possessed accurate figures for it, without the need to look at documents. His goal was to renovate all schools in his municipality, some completely while some others only partially, and finish them by the end of his term.

61 Interview with the mayor of a rural municipality in the Polog region, conducted on 19.03.2021.

62 Ibid.

“For these renovations, the municipality has received nothing from MES or the central government. All the reconstruction is covered by grants from international organizations”.⁶³

However, the municipality estimates that both in times of crisis and in normal conditions, they are not consulted and are not part of any work group, in order to contribute to finding innovative models for the education system in the country.

“A huge zero! That’s how much we are consulted and involved to contribute. But we can, and we want to be involved. As mayors we spend time at the schools on daily basis and know what they need. The context is specific in our case. We had only one meeting with the Minister and that’s it!”⁶⁴

Evidently, municipalities have made efforts to overcome the crisis across all sectors. The education sector, as it seems, was not one of the top priorities in the rural municipality of the Polog region. Mayors lead all the operations in the municipalities and they manage with the budget and its execution. They also hire and appoint their members of staff. In doing so, they should pay particular attention to the professional portfolio of the person they are appointing to serve as the head of the education sector. Moreover, the same goes for school directors. It is utterly the responsibility of the principals to coordinate between the school and the mayor and to provide logistical support to the school to realize its curriculum. During the interviews with this municipal administration, it became obvious that the education sector lacked both practical and theoretical knowledge about education. What is more, the sector did not operate as a fully autonomous body.

The education sector of one of the urban municipalities, proved that municipalities do have the capacity to manage the education system, even in complex municipal circumstances, where the number of schools is higher than the usual. This municipality was selected precisely because of the number of students in the system, but also because of the multicultural and multiethnic character. In this specific context, it was surprising to witness the lack of cooperation between the mayor and the education sector. This was purely reflected by the director of the high school, who was not at all cooperative on this project. Nonetheless, from a research standpoint, such occasions are standard yet give special value to the research itself. It was also easy to understand that the mayor avoids the education sector and communicates directly with school directors, leaving aside a person who is fairly familiar with the education sector in the municipality. This situation immensely compromises the quality of education while at the same time negatively impacts the learning process and the teaching profession. As a result of this dysfunction, research in this municipality was

63 Ibid

64 Ibid

re-focused on teachers and students, in order to assess its impact on them. The arrogance and the autocratic approach of the high school director, apparently affects the wellbeing and motivation among teachers and students. Unsurprisingly, a teacher from the school asserted that due to the excessive political influence on the main stakeholders in the school, the reputation of the teacher is highly compromised.

“I don’t belong to any political party, so after several years of working in the school, I can’t get a bank loan and be able to live independently. This is because I am not full-time employed. One year they assign 10 classes per week, another year 14, and so on I do not know what to expect each year.”⁶⁵

On the other hand, a student from the school stated:

“Municipal authorities should be ashamed because they never managed to build a modern school with normal hygienic conditions as in other countries, for more than 15 years now. Without modern schools, there’s no reforms... By the way, no trace of them: Reforms can only be heard of, not seen!”⁶⁶

Despite all of the turmoil, measures were apparently sent to this municipality and well received by schools. They were sent and received via e-mail.

“Yes, we got them via e-mail, but received no instructions about them. The document you are asking about (Guidelines on Teaching Methodology for Distance Learning in Primary and Secondary Education) ... we received it, but I have no idea how it was implemented in schools.”⁶⁷

Similarly, this urban municipality was never part of a work group for the development of measures, nor was anyone informed about any other municipalities from the region or other institutions or individuals from the sector to have been part of any. Interviewees in this municipal region consider that measures were not adopted in a transparent manner. People at the municipality believe that politics is too much involved in the educational system and therefore good quality education was not offered even in regular conditions, not to mention pandemic conditions.

“School directors are politically appointed, as are teachers. If this continues to go on, we will never implement quality education.”⁶⁸

65 Interview with a professor from an urban secondary school in the Pelagonija region, conducted on 15.04.2021.

66 Feedback from a student from secondary school in an urban municipality in the Pelagonija region during a focus group research.

67 Interview with the educational sector of an urban municipality in the Pelagonija region, conducted on 23.03.2021.

68 Ibid

In primary and secondary education, school directors are key personnel who manage human and material resources, in order to create quality work conditions for teachers. A school is built to provide quality education to students, which in North Macedonia is guaranteed by law. As organizations, schools have additional administrative and technical procedures that are part of daily activities, including hygiene and physical development. One example is digitalization of schools, a process which needs to be managed and implemented by school directors. Digitalization is part of the educational process in a school; therefore, the work of a school director cannot be seen only as technical. In other words, if school directors are not leaders of the educational processes, who else can manage learning and support teaching? Unfortunately, feedback received through this research presents a completely different realm. Oddly enough, school directors typically see themselves as staff appointed to deal with technical issues, which paradoxically they refer to as “pedagogical tasks.” Below is an explicit illustration:

“My work is mainly pedagogical. I manage order in the school, hygiene, assure heating is on in winter, issue documents, register arrival time of professors, gather information on absent students on daily basis, make sure that all school bills are paid duly, perform a grade analysis, and generally manage with human resources.”

There are similarities between this school director and the one from the rural municipality in the Polog regions, both of whom predominantly see their roles as technical rather than pedagogical. Conversely, the school director in the rural school in the Polog region, in normal circumstances, conducts teaching observations sporadically. Nevertheless, this didn’t appear to be a case with the school director at the high school in the Eastern region.

“In normal circumstances I observe the way a lesson is delivered as to make sure that we are offering good quality teaching in the school. I inform the teachers in advance and fill in the form which we receive from MES. However, I am not doing it now during the pandemic.”⁶⁹

Apart from the importance of the professional profiles of school directors and their roles within schools, this research primarily sought to trace the measures destined for this school. We reviewed measures together with the director of the high school in the urban municipality in the Eastern Region, while during the review, he indicated that he received most of them by email; nevertheless, there were some that he did not receive, including one of the most central ones.

69 Interview with a school director of a primary school in a rural municipality in the Polog Region, conducted on 19.03.2021.

I received this document (Guidelines for Teachers on the Method of Assigning Grades to Students in the Period of Implementing Distance Teaching and Learning). This one... I haven't received (Guidelines on Delivering Shortened Study Programs). Although the first document was sent to the school, it wasn't very helpful. The grades from the second semester from school year 2019/2020 are generally not realistic.”⁷⁰

School directors are considered central entities in the administrative hierarchy who should bear the heaviest responsibility for the normal operation of schools. When schools are successful, school directors should be rewarded. Similarly, when schools are not achieving good results, school directors should be held accountable. In a parallel, the same holds true for teachers. However, given that school directors are seldom called out as professionally unfit to achieve the standards of modern education and to implement schoolwide digitalization, they are subject to harsh criticism by independent and non-governmental organizations.

“School directors are the weakest links in the system.”⁷¹

Non-governmental organizations also think that the overall system needs to be reformed. They point out that school directors as central to the educational system, should play key advice-giving roles in schools, particularly regarding measures and their implementation during crisis.

“Measures, were most probably received by all schools! But, did schools perform any analysis on them? That's a different story. I think not since some schools need more professional support. Some of the key people who should provide support are 'semi-experts'. Generally, the number of people with a solid academic portfolio in education is quite small!”⁷²

Teachers and students remain a driving force in the education system. Teachers are in direct contact with students on daily basis, so it is generally considered that they possess a lot more information about them, beyond the grades that they assign. Some teachers went past their technical and professional capacities to serve their students diligently, at a time of a massive disruption of the education system. They used their phones and personal computers to connect with their students or just send them work to complete, only to fulfil their noble duty assigned by their high morals.

“Teachers played a vital role in closing the school year during the disruption. I admit, teachers are very hardworking people, and they'll do everything so that students receive good education. They, however, are not systematically sup-

70 Interview with a school director of a secondary school from an urban municipality in the Eastern Region, conducted on 26.03.2021

71 Interview with a representative of SONK, conducted on 12.03.2021.

72 Interview with a civil society representative operating on a central level, conducted on 15.03.2021.

*ported and are underpaid”.*⁷³

Of all the interviews conducted with teachers, all of them provided key points on the reason the education system suffered the most during the pandemic. Some of the key points included lack of systematic investments in the sector through investing in professional development of teachers and school directors, outdated education system not keeping pace with modern trends, and no substantial reforms implemented in the system with teachers at the forefront setting the pace and mode.

“We know best what needs to be reformed in education, but nobody asks us. We’ve been neglected, just like with online teaching when we were left unsupported, from the very beginning up until now.”⁷⁴

Apparently, the measures never reached the teachers. None of the teachers interviewed recognized the documents they received via e-mail, as interviews were carried out.

“Which documents? I don’t understand! Are they intended for us? Even if we received them, what difference would they have made? Maybe after sending them, authors could have at least explained them. One document has 49 pages! Do they think that they will draft and send these documents overnight and as a result we will suddenly implement better online teaching? Please!”⁷⁵

Teachers estimate that an urgent investment is needed in the digitalization of schools and that it should happen immediately. They are utterly interested to continuously develop their skills, mainly through partnerships and exchange programs which would provide a new perspective on modern digital education. They see digitalization as inevitable and, as such, they believe it should become part of university curricula for teacher-training programs. Teachers also believe that for structured and sustainable reforms, collective trust in teachers should be increased by enhancing the value of the teaching profession in the society.

“We needed daily trainings during summer, not documents. We went through a short training on how to use a platform which later proved to be non-operational. To have sustainable reforms, we need an enormous investment in school digitalization and training via exchange programs. For full educational reforms, one must first restore the dignity of the teaching profession in in society.”⁷⁶

73 Interview with a representative of SONK conducted 12.03.2021.

74 Interview with a primary school teacher from a rural municipality in the Polog Region, conducted 12.04.2021.

75 Interview with a secondary school teacher from an urban municipality in the Pelagonija Region, conducted on 15.04.2021.

76 Interview with a secondary school teacher from an urban municipality from the Eastern Region, conducted on 29.03.2021

Teachers and students have very similar views on how the education system should look like after the pandemic. Students see the pandemic as an opportunity to change the current outdated education system, once and for all. They believe that it is due time for digitalization to become an inevitable part of the education system and that when everything returns to normal, online learning management systems will remain an integral part of the system. Having access to online learning management systems would allow students to maintain permanent contact with the class, have access to class resources and the teacher at all times, and extend learning beyond the 45 minutes class time.

“After the pandemic, teachers must invest in the development of new teaching methods through combined approaches. I am currently attending the same high school my father attended, and no change has happened ever since! After the pandemic, modernization of teaching methods and the overall pedagogy must be implemented. This cannot continue anymore!”⁷⁷

“I agree with my colleague. I think, after the pandemic, all professors close to retirement should retire by having their pensions subsidized, so that a change can occur. Frankly, older teachers will never change, and conditions should be created for the younger ones to acquire modern teaching skills. We mustn't be bored at school any longer.”⁷⁸

Political lobbying and cronyism involved in education is another common point where students and teachers agree on. Students believe that precisely because of this negative phenomenon, there is currently no functional education system. Science and technology are evolving, and so should constituents in the education system. Students also strongly believe that they should become part of the decision-making process in the sector, in order to be able to shift learning outcomes to critical thinking, learning through problem-based projects, and through experiential education. They assert firmly that party-appointed professors do not possess the skills to provide them the education they need. Generally, students show uncompromised support for younger generation teachers who above all know how to create a relationship with them and motivate them to achieve more.

“I have a young teacher who has just graduated from the university. The way that she connects with us is on a completely different level compared to the way the older or politically hired professors connect with us. The problem is that these – the good professors – do not last long in our schools because they are not appreciated enough.”⁷⁹

77 Feedback from a secondary school student during the focus group research with representatives from three regions in RNM, conducted on 05.04.2021.

78 Feedback from a secondary school student during the focus group research with representatives from three regions in RNM, conducted on 05.04.2021.

79 Feedback from a secondary school student during the focus group research with representatives from three regions in RNM, conducted on 05.04.2021.

Students said that quality of education has not been on the focus of school leaders during the pandemic. They claim that way too much weight was devoted to health, which according to them is significant; nevertheless, for senior high school students who were part of the group, the time spent receiving poor quality online education may result with failure to enroll to university. This may be a classical example of how a poor system management fails youngsters and obstructs their way to unlock their full potential.

“It’s good that the country cares for us and our health, but the quality of education we receive is equally important, now that we are learning online. Quality under the current circumstances is not possible particularly because our professors fail to deliver and the materials we are studying from are not sufficiently adequate. As time goes by, it’s getting worse rather than seeing any improvements in that respect.”⁸⁰

Quality education remains the highest priority for students. They will not negotiate whether education is the most important sector, in a given society, because to them, it is. They strongly support the principle that an educated society is a free society and therefore they deem that all national capacities should be directed towards sustainable educational reform that would have their seal as well. Students demand inclusive reform of the overall system, similar to the ones in the developed countries.

“What is happening in our country is sad. I think that education is the very foundation of any society, and every country attempts to constantly improve education. That’s where we need to start from We cannot reform any other segment in the society if our education is dysfunctional. That is what is happening in our case.”⁸¹

80 Feedback from a secondary school student during the focus group research with representatives from three regions in RNM, conducted on 05.04.2021.

81 Feedback from a secondary school student during the focus group research with representatives from three regions in RNM, conducted on 05.04.2021.

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CONCLUSION

The purpose of this research project was to assess the impact, relevance, transparency, and utilization of measures created by MES and BDE, on a national level, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result of the crisis, the Government of the Republic of North Macedonia, MES and BDE, through adopting decrees with legal force, protocols, guidelines, and plans, attempted to create a normal stream of the educational process.

The Ministry of Education and Science and the Bureau for the Development of Education created documents with robust information, all in order to adjust both onsite and online teaching in extraordinary circumstances. Through the document review process, conducted for the purpose of this analysis, it was easily comprehensible that an immense amount of time had been invested in creating documents by officials at MES and BDE, who apparently are very well acquainted with the sector and its needs. Similarly, through textual analysis of the measures, it was obvious that research had been conducted on modern trends in education and that contemporary education components had been included, in order to assure quality distance learning, through online learning management systems.

Undeniably, in order to write content that will result in clear understanding by the target audience, the author of the text must come to know the audience closely, through knowing both about them and their needs. In other words, a needs assessment and an audience analysis must take place before anything is produced for a specific audience. On this matter, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, through their Writing Center, assert that before writing a text, it is best to assess the knowledge of the target group by selecting a few group members with whom the author has ever had contact.⁸²

It is becoming increasingly clearer that the text used in the measures, mostly those intended to assist school directors and teachers on maintaining uninterrupted distance learning, contained terms that were not entirely common. These terms were not properly referenced to the original sources, whilst at the same time, additional notes were not provided. The example of the *Flipped*

82 Indiana University of Pennsylvania Writing Center. Determining your audience. Available at iup.edu/writing-center. Accessed on 20.04.2021.

Classroom concept discussed with the primary school principal at the rural municipality, is a solid argument on such an instance. New teaching concepts should not be introduced in documents whose sole intention is to assist school directors and teachers to manage with the educational process during a crisis. Instead, such concepts should be introduced during professional development trainings.

Many measures did not even reach schools, as intended. Although the option of sending them by e-mail enables fast and secure dissemination, they were not received at most schools. On the other hand, teachers were not aware that measures were even created. In almost every school or municipality, there were one or two measures that were not received at all. The purpose of the measures was to serve schools so that teachers can deliver quality instruction while at the same time allow students to master the material intended for their educational progress. Nevertheless, besides the abundance, measures were not central to schools and municipalities, both for technical as well as subjective reasons. The impression that emerged from all the meetings indicated that schools, except for the technical implementation of Microsoft TEAMS (after the fiasco with the national platform), did not have much to say about the measures, particularly because they were quite unfamiliar with them, their content, and their aim.

Measures did not reach schools due to the fact that many stakeholders in the education sector, in different regions, were not involved in their creation. This means that the measures were not adopted in a transparent manner, hence did not achieve the goal of having an equally positive impact on all schools in the country. None of the school directors, heads of education departments, teachers, high school students from the three regions, who were part of this analysis, claimed that they were part of any work group to create measures, protocols, guidelines or work plans. One of the biggest enigmas in this process, for which all stakeholders in the sector agree, is the reason why MES and BDE did not conduct any follow-ups for of trainings with school directors and teachers. This process would have helped to a large extent in the successful implementation of each measure, as originally intended.

Similarly, no central or local civil society organization, working in the education sector, was involved in creating any or part of the measures. Despite the fact that two civil society organizations are already cooperating with the MES and BDE on other projects, they were not invited to get involved and help with the process of creating measures. As mentioned earlier, CSO's could have at least helped disseminate measures to schools, where they continuously implement projects or volunteer to help. The organizations that were part of this research have an extensive network of membership of young people, who could have been involved through various trainings in order to implement the mea-

asures. In fact, this was originally pointed out by a local CSO:

“They could have at least sent the documents and ask us to help disseminate and implement them in schools. We work with primary schools on different projects and we know exactly where we can help. We would have analyzed the measures and organized trainings for the schools of this region so that they could have been implemented. We know all school directors of the primary schools who, unfortunately, are not fit enough to lead with the education process in general”. (same as footnote 57)

The measures adopted and created by MES and BDE contain relevant information on the crisis but are not relevant to the crisis. They have clear instructions and protocols to protect schools from the virus while providing solid teaching conditions both for online and onsite learning, but they did not achieve the goal. This analysis shows that measures did not have a positive impact on schools and the educational process, since municipalities and schools partially received them, but most importantly, they were not additionally informed on their content. This is also confirmed by the UNICEF analysis, which explicitly states that the instructions given to the teachers were not clear enough.

“Significant number of teachers claim that they received no instructions, or not clear enough instructions for organizing distance teaching from MES, especially from MES agencies.”⁸³

“Teachers claim that in the absence of specific guidelines for organizing distance learning, they were left to fend for themselves”.⁸⁴

It was especially important for students to holistically evaluate the work of the Ministry of Education and Science in managing the educational process during the pandemic. On a grade scale from 1 to 10 (where 1 is the weakest and 10 the best grade), out of 9 students from three regions who participated in the focus group, only one rated it with a grade of 3. Regrettably, all other students in the group provided a grade of 0 (zero). In general, both teachers and students believe that the gap in the education system in the country, which is currently assessed to be at 3.7 years, will expand due to the crisis with the pandemic, thus the learning loss will deepen. Teachers believed that through an inclusive process, which would involve them, as well as experts and civil society organizations in the sector, the measures would have been effectively implemented. High school students also felt that they could contribute through their engagement. They believed that as end users in the education system, they would engage with all their potential, in order for it to be functional and to reduce the

83 Reactor – Research in Action, EXPERIENCES AND OPINIONS ON DISTANCE LEARNING. Combined findings from the research of school directors, teachers, and students. July – August 2020. Report provided by UNICEF, Skopje.

84 Ibid

current learning gap. They remain firm to the ideal not to deviate from the quest to invest in the professional development of teachers and the development of contemporary teaching and learning methods.

Finally, the students' quest for quality teaching and learning, is in line with one of Sir Ken Robinson's claims in his book *Creative Schools*. According to him, "formal education has three main elements: curriculum, teaching, and assessment." He estimates that "no matter how detailed a curriculum is and how expensive the tests are; the real key to transforming education the quality of teaching."(page 100)⁸⁵

6 LIMITATIONS

The purpose of this research project was to obtain an authentic understanding about the process of creating the measures, their dissemination, and their impact on schools, through an analysis of the experiences and perspectives of key stakeholders in the system. Through a combination of strategies, tools, and methods, the research achieved its objectives and answered the guiding research questions. Resources and logistics enabled the realization of all planned interviews, with key entities in the education sector, in three regions in the country. Participants invested real effort and time while providing as much content as possible during the conversations conducted.

The limitations of this research are mainly peripheral and do not necessarily affect the quality of the results and conclusions. For a qualitative research that focuses on generating themes and content through the experiences of the participants, the very profile and the integrity of the participants is at the center. The participants who were part of this research are key entities in the sector, in all three regions of the country. They are involved in policy development, execution, and as end-users. As such, in combination with the methodological framework, the research strategy, the specific tools, and the target audience, this project achieved its targets.

The COVID-19 pandemic itself appeared as a limitation to this research. Under normal circumstances, instead of ZOOM or phone conversations, all in-depth interviews would have been conducted with physical presence and in much more comfortable settings. This is specific and especially important for meetings with school directors, teachers, and students. During the interviews with them, they always referred to poor school conditions; however, they were

85 Robinson, K. & Aronica, L. (2015). *Creative schools: The grassroots revolution that is transforming education*. Penguin Books. New York.

unable to physically present the conditions, for the purpose of their argumentation and the purpose of this research. On the other hand, students were happy to participate in the research. They felt valued for the opportunity to talk about the conditions in the schools where they attend classes and specifically asserted that they would like to showcase the poor conditions in their schools, in support of their arguments. However, this research lacks the physical experience in schools across the country, which itself poses a limitation.

Schools in Skopje were not part of this research. Namely, only 25% of the population lives in the capital while the remaining 75% live in smaller urban and rural municipalities. More specifically, according to the World Bank, 40% of the population lives in rural areas ⁸⁶, which inevitably means that the remaining 35% live in smaller urban municipalities. This is an indicator that the education system in North Macedonia consists mainly of schools from smaller urban and rural municipalities, which according to [Patrice Buzzanelle](#), are referred to as the layer of society where the truth should be sought. In sum, the purpose of this research was not to draw indications; on the contrary, the purpose of this study was to perform an assessment of the impact of COVID-19 on the education sector and to generate conclusions through the experiences of the participants in the scheme. Another important component which adds value to this study is the credibility of participants, as an important element in qualitative research. Similarly, ethics and transparency of this research project are two driving means which elevate the whole research process on a higher level.

86 The World Bank. Primary Education Improvement Project (P171973). Project Information Document (PID). 28 September, 2020. Available at documents1.worldbank.org. (accessed on 10.03.2021).

7

RECOMMENDATIONS

Findings confirm systemic inconsistencies that should be overcome as soon as possible to avoid further impact on the educational system and on students' progress. The Covid-19 crisis continues, as this report is drafted. Consequently, relevant institutions must act swiftly and redirect education on the right track. Additionally, institutions must learn lessons from the oversights during the crisis in order to prepare for future disruptions.

The Ministry of Education and Science must increase the transparency of its work by including key players in the policymaking and future development of measures. The most important stakeholders who can contribute in the development of any guidelines, protocols, or decrees are civic organizations from the educational sector operating on national and local level. To avoid creating sizeable documents, difficult to understand and implement, schools, through school directors and teachers, should be part of inclusive work groups. Similarly, heads of education sectors in local municipalities must be included in decision-making. They are in constant contact with schools and understand the dynamics of the sector itself. This will also strengthen ties between national institutions and local municipalities, hence with schools and teachers. In the future, when measures or policies are developed, target groups should be on the focus, as suggested by Indiana University from Pennsylvania.

As far as the civic organizations from the field of education are concerned, findings from this research show that they are limited in number, on a national level, therefore the establishment of new organizations on both national and local level should be stimulated. For example, in the eastern region of the country, apart from one civic organization dealing primarily with non-formal education, there are no other CSOs to serve as watchdogs or provide expertise that could help schools achieve their potential. The civic organization from the eastern region strongly advocated on the need for organizations that would monitor, evaluate, and support the sector on a regional level. Specifically, it was suggested that particular projects on improving the quality of learning, teaching, and extra curriculars are more than required.

Along the same lines, Francois Lafond, advisor to the Deputy Prime Minister in charge of European Affairs in the Republic of North Macedonia, Associate Professor and lecturer at several universities, during an interview with the MKEU portal stated:



“Civil Society Organizations must be a bold counterweight, acting as professionally and rigorously as they could. The more they develop their monitoring activities, the more the country will advance.”⁸⁷

Relevant institutions must include follow-up plans in their work and conduct impact assessment analysis, in order to evaluate the effectiveness of measures and policies after a given period. That way, the relevance of all policies developed by the sector could be measured, while the process will assure improvements of the model implemented to create and disseminate documents to end users.

Interinstitutional cooperation must be promoted to a higher level through drafting work plans which include all stakeholders in the educational system. As the most important in the system, teachers, students, and parents must be involved in the decision-making. This research identified these groups as isolated from the process.

In this realm, for efficient inter-institutional cooperation it is necessary to create a digital intranet platform, where all relevant institutions will communicate among each other, without external influences. This system would enable obtaining documents in real time, and allow for a follow-up via teleconferencing. Similarly, it would allow all stakeholders to be informed about any policy creation, by the authors themselves.

In the future, measures and policies should be developed based on previously conducted detailed analysis on the needs of schools and students. In times of crisis, such analysis can be conducted with digital tools and sent to all schools. In normal circumstances, a combined model of digital tools and field research could be applied. MES and BDE must leave the comfort of their offices and spend more time with schools, meet with teachers, students, and parents. Policy development should not solely happen in offices, without direct acquaintance with needs from the field, as it was the case with the measures analyzed in this study.

Bureaucratic approaches to carrying out administrative duties should be discarded. Without changing this approach, no other reforms destined for the educational system will be possible. Only by understanding the field, having sufficient evidence from research, as well as involving main stakeholders in the process, structural reforms can be implemented in the system. Moreover, school directors need to start playing key roles in managing the quality of teaching and learning and take leadership in all school level reforms.

Policy interventions are necessary to amend the process for appointing school directors. Greater authority must be granted to School Boards to appoint and dismiss school directors, and oversee the work of the schools, overall.

⁸⁷ MKEU. Resource platform for citizens and media. Interview with Francois Lafond, Advisor to the Deputy Prime minister in charge of European integrations in the Republic of North Macedonia. Available at eu.org.mk. Accessed on 20.04.2021

The same policy should specify the model members of the Board are selected. Similarly, the policy should also determine the professional profile of the heads of education sectors within municipalities, as key personnel for coordination and logistics for schools. This model would help decentralize education, give more autonomy to schools, and democratize the society, overall.

Quality of teaching and learning should be treated as a national treasure. All documents on improving the quality of education should be accompanied by appropriate training. On paper, most documents which are generated by authorities possess ample information, but without follow-up explanatory sessions, they wouldn't live to their goals.

Finally, MES should perform comprehensive research on a national level, across the education sector, to collect data from schools and supporting institutions. Such an operation of data collection would enable the development of quality policies. Countries with advanced educational systems did this in the first phase of reforms they carried out, thereby organizing and implementing the whole operation through stakeholders in the system. This approach would enable people working in the system to familiarize with specific issues in it and ultimately result in quality policymaking in an inclusive process. Additionally, this would motivate municipalities and civic organizations from the sector to get involved and would most probably encourage the establishment of new organizations in the sector. Currently, education in our country is managed through big data collected by organizations like The World Bank and OECD for their own research purposes. For this matter, [Passi Sahlberg](#), one of the most famous education experts in the world, says: "If you don't lead with small data, you'll be led by big data".



Civilization is a race between education and catastrophe

H.G. Wells

