

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL SERBIA AT THE TIME OF THE COVID - 19

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Abstract Covid 19 is a disease that has spread all over the world. It caused upheavals in all societies and segments of society. This also relates to the Serbian society and its educational system. Education, as an important part of society, experienced a concussion. Serbia's cumbersome education system, many ongoing reforms, dissatisfaction of educators, many unresolved issues were now additionally burdened by the crown and everything it brings with it. How much of the education system, to which the primary school belongs, has successfully responded to these changes? The inflexibility and inelasticity of the education system was a major obstacle in response to such a large demand made by the Coronavirus. The transition from school to online teaching was stressful for all participants: pupils, parents and teachers. In addition to changes in the way of working, primary schools in Serbia have faced problems with the lack of information technology needed for distance learning, teaching staff who are not educated for this type of teaching, but also the quality of such teaching. All this raised the question of the quality of knowledge that pupils acquired during distance learning. The paper will discuss the management of the primary school at the time of the Covid 19, the problems encountered and how they were solved.

Keywords:

Elementary school,
Covid 19,
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1 Introduction

Emergencies caused by infectious diseases, as in the case of corona, do not happen so often. But the term „emergency“ is not only related to infectious diseases, but much more broadly. According to the classification, the epidemic of the Covid-19 virus belongs to natural emergencies. They pose a threat to the human population and usually have major and significant consequences. In addition to the coronavirus, there are other natural emergencies such as: landslides, floods, fires, earthquakes, heat and cold climate waves and many others. All this indicates that emergencies are not a rare occurrence in Serbia. They have happened in the past, they are happening in the present, and there are all chances that in the future they will be even more frequent, fiercer and that we must be ready for them. The state must be ready to react to them quickly and efficiently.

All of them have a strong impact on the education system as a important segment of society. Whether they happen on a global or local level, they leave consequences on learning, teaching, and not infrequently on the entire education system. Covid-19 is a disease that has spread all over the world. It closed many schools and changed the way, methods and forms of education. A large number of pupils, their parents and teachers became ill from it. Many of them did not survive. It is a process with long-lasting consequences in education. It still lasts and changes teaching and learning over time. In Serbia, at the very beginning, it completely closed schools. Today, the situation in most schools is such that people go to classes in groups. Classes are shortened. Part of the teaching takes place at a distance.

Covid-19 is another test for our education system. We are aware of the fact that distance learning is a „necessary evil“. To what extent and with what consequences, it remains to be seen. The quality of teaching and learning has been reduced, and this will be reflected in knowledge. If we know that knowledge is the greatest potential of today in the development of a society, then we can guess what consequences this pandemic will have on the economic, social, cultural and every other segment of Serbia, but also the whole world.

2 Covid-19 and other emergencies in serbia

Emergency situations in Serbia means: “A situation when the risks and threats or consequences of catastrophes, emergencies and other dangers to the population, environment and material goods are of such scope and intensity that their occurrence or consequences cannot be prevented or eliminated by regular action of the authorities. services, which is why it is necessary to use special measures, forces and means to mitigate and eliminate them with an intensified regime of work [Law on Emergency Situations].” This law defines an emergency situation as a threat that cannot be prevented or eliminated, which does not mean that the state cannot adequately respond to it. By the fact that situations like this have happened to us, and some have even been repeated.

Are we always ready to answer them? We are not. History was supposed to teach us life lessons of the present and the future.

A little more than 20 years ago, Serbia experienced NATO bombing. It severely destroyed the country's infrastructure. Even more severe consequences were the loss of human lives. Among those killed were children. Classes were interrupted, schools were closed. The consequences are not known even today. There is still a discussion in Serbia and there is great disagreement about the consequences of the bombing. A study by the Commission to Investigate the Consequences of the NATO Bombing in 1999 showed that children born between 1999 and 2015 were exposed to a toxic factor that influenced them to be susceptible to malignant diseases [Politika]. If the claims of this commission are true, it can be rightly ask the question of state responsibility. In addition to this, which is one of the most difficult situations in the 20th century in Serbia, other extraordinary situations occurred in the same century.

In the 1990s, a large number of refugees from the former republics of SFRY came to Serbia. Out of the total number of refugees and expellees, over 143,000 are children (<https://arhiva.srbija-info.gov.rs/cinjenice/izbegli.html>). The education system of Serbia is faced with a great task; to receive and integrate such a large number of children with all the obligations towards those children. This included psychological and humanitarian assistance to both children and their parents. In addition to these examples, Serbia was hit by floods and earthquakes. Obrenovac, as well as other flooded areas, required action in emergency situations.

And the latest emergency situation with the Covid-19 virus is a continuation of difficult and demanding actions of both the state and the education system. According to UNICEF (2020), during the pandemic, one million children around the world were left at home due to the closure of schools and preschools. In addition, the organization pointed to the impact of the pandemic on increasing poverty, inequality and vulnerability of children. The health crisis caused by Covid-19 is threatening to become a crisis in terms of children's rights. In any case, Covid-19 represents a shock to the education system globally, to a greater or lesser extent. All that also relates to Serbia. The responses to this shock were different, ie they differed from country to country. It was mainly the introduction of different modalities of distance learning and learning. Of course, where was possible. Regardless of the quality and type of reaction, the loss of what has been learned will be significant and cannot be avoided. It will disproportionately affect vulnerable groups. It is estimated that a larger number of pupils from these groups will experience regression to a state of functional illiteracy, and some will drop out of further education. Also, estimates show that the percentage of pupils with below-average achievement of the reading average can increase from 53 to 61 percent. Among others, the countries of the Western Balkans are making efforts to make education more effective, resilient and inclusive. As Covid-19 lasts for a long time, so did the states and their education systems adapt, trying to eliminate shortcomings and mistakes. This has meant reducing the digital divide, improving digital skills and introducing many innovations.

Serbia has tried in the best way to respond to the demanding situation of this pandemic. Unlike rich countries, which had better conditions, Serbia managed in the ways it could. The question, to which time will give an answer, is it whether could have done it faster, better and with better quality, considering the great experience with emergency situations it has.

3 Modes, forms and methods of teaching during the pandemic in serbia

When it comes to the shortcomings of the teaching process in Serbia, its objections are usually that time lags, that the ways of working are outdated, lecture teaching with knowledge transfer and reproduction in pupils examinations, lack of modern teaching technology and incompetence - inability of teachers with modern teaching

technology. These are enough problems even without emergencies. Covid-19 posed a difficult challenge to this and this kind of education system.

All these problems were present in large numbers at the very beginning of the pandemic in Serbia. In time, they tried to get remove.

A bulky system with strong centralization is more difficult to adapt to such situations. At the very beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic in Serbia, we switched to online classes. The crossing time itself was debatable. There has been sharp controversy in the public about why the transition to distance learning is awaited, given the large number of infected and sick people. The next problem is what and how pupils who do not have the opportunities and means to get involved in distance learning will learn. According to union estimates, 10% of students did not have access to online classes. And that's not a small number. The digitalization of education, which was planned by the competent ministry in 2016, did not react adequately to this emergency situation. With the introduction of the state of emergency, on March 15, 2020, teachers, pupils and their parents had only a few days to prepare and learn what digital teaching is. The introduction of distance learning meant access to the Internet. The union estimates that 8.5-10 thousand children did not have internet, computers and smartphones, and some did not even have televisions. At that time, the Ministry claimed that all children, more precisely 99%, were included in distance learning. So, completely opposite attitudes in one system. The big problem was that a significant number of teachers did not have technical equipment or worked with their computers, telephones and the Internet. The unions pointed out that the teachers were left to fend for themselves, which caused stress. Teacher education for such classes took place in progress. Seminars for teachers were organized.

All guidelines for organizing distance teaching came from the Ministry of Education, Science, Technological Development. But also the institutes of the ministry, schools, teachers, everyone reacted from their domain and organized distance teaching. It was conceived as a combination of TV teaching, teacher-student interaction through digital classrooms and online platforms, and independent student learning. Most schools in Serbia have opted for the Google classroom.

Classes were conducted according to the situation with the pandemic; from the total transition to distance learning, to the arrival of pupils in school in groups or as a whole if epidemiological measures allowed.

The guidelines given by the Ministry of Education to schools referred to the organization of classes in new conditions. In the beginning, it was the broadcasting of teaching content on TV. Based on these guidelines, teachers wrote plans on a weekly basis. Also, each school had to make a weekly operational plan. At the very beginning, there were ambiguities. The teachers were stopped by the Coronavirus on one part of the teaching contents, and the other part was broadcast on TV. It was a question where to start. How to make an operational weekly teacher plan? When pupils started coming to school in groups, schools differed in class schedules. Part of the schools included all subjects in the class schedule, and in some schools the material of some subjects was realized by distance learning, while the other part was realized in school desks. The competent ministry made a decision on the visit of counselors and inspectors to schools, which caused dissatisfaction among educators. Although the ministry explained that the tour of the school was aimed at providing assistance, the situation with the understanding of that situation has not changed. The ministry subsequently suspended the tour. Such situations are not desirable in such a difficult time. If they were needed, they should have been organized in a different way.

As time pass on, ministry tried to correct mistakes, fix and improve such classes. Despite all efforts, it will never be like regular classes. Especially from the pupils' point of view.

4 Pupils and online teaching

The most important factor in this situation and distance learning are the pupils. They are most affected in this situation. Despite the numerous advantages of online teaching and the use of modern information technology, this type of teaching has major disadvantages. The social aspect of children was the first to be hit in online teaching. The process of socialization at all levels is very important for the proper development of each child's personality. Work, and thus life, on social networks cannot replace direct socializing in the classroom, school, on the way home. There

was no direct contact with teachers. In addition, this way of working brings problems in excessive stay next to computers, televisions, mobile phones. Even before the pandemic, there was a problem of digital violence, children staying on the Internet for several hours and everything that social networks bring in a negative context. In addition, the children spent less time in the fresh air. They moved less, which had a direct impact on their health. However, online teaching also had a positive effect. These were primarily family relationships. Parents spent more time with their children and were more involved in their child's learning and teaching.

All these advantages and disadvantages of online teaching when combined with the advantages and disadvantages of traditional teaching, it can be concluded that traditional teaching with a combination of online teaching can give good results. These experiences of a difficult time of a pandemic can be very good and useful in the future. They just need to be applied in an adequate way.

5 Research on online teaching among fifth grade pupils

During primary school education, a particularly sensitive age category of pupils are: first and fifth grade pupils. Due to major changes, fifth grade pupils were selected for this research. They were interesting because last school year, when the pandemic started, everyone went to online classes, and this school year they go to school according to a combined model of teaching, that is. They go in groups, every second day to school. Other days follow classes via TV, Google classroom; from home. The fifth grade is also stressful due to the transition from the classroom to the subject system of teaching. Pupils receive new subjects, new cabinets, a class teacher, more teachers, etc.

5.1. Interpretation of research results

Period of research: January, February 2021.

Place: Surčin, elementary schools

Sample: 100 pupils of fifth grade

Research instrument: A survey for fifth grade pupils prepared for the purpose by pedagogue Katarina Diklić

Results

Answer the question: „Is it harder or easier for you in the 5th grade than in the 4th grade?“

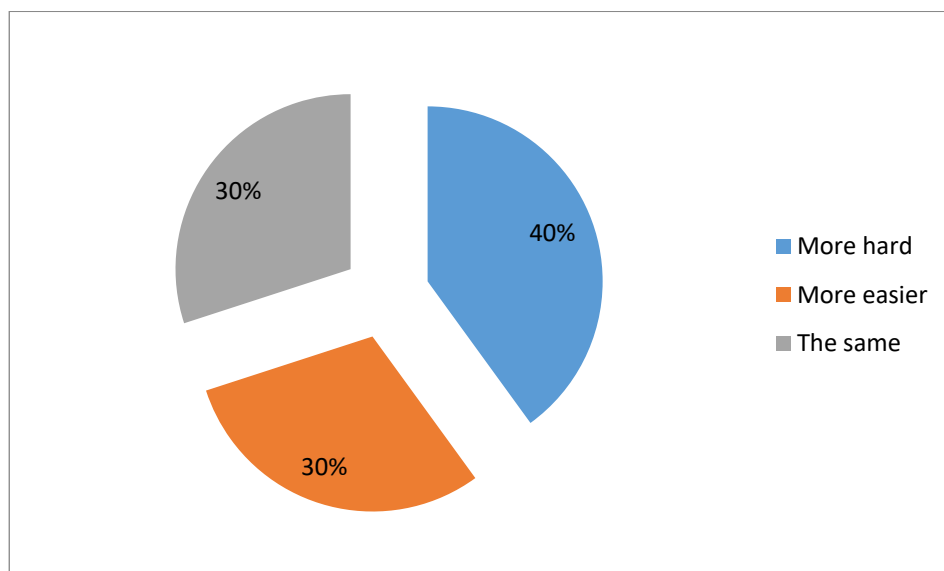


Figure 1: Pupils' answer about the difficulty of teaching in the 5th grade

About 40% of pupils answered that it was harder for them in the 5th grade than in the 4th grade, 30% answered that it was easier for them, and 30% of pupils answered that it was the same for them in the 4th and 5th grade. If we take the sum of pupils who answered „easier“ and the percentage of pupils who answered „the same“ in the 4th and 5th grade, we get the data that 70% of pupils passed the adaptation to the 5th grade well. This is a good indicator for distance learning because the assumption is that pupils who easily adapt to the change of the system of teaching and learning in the 5th grade, will not have major problems in adapting to online teaching.

To the question “Are their classes better: a) at a distance, b) regular c) doesn’t metter, the pupils answered:

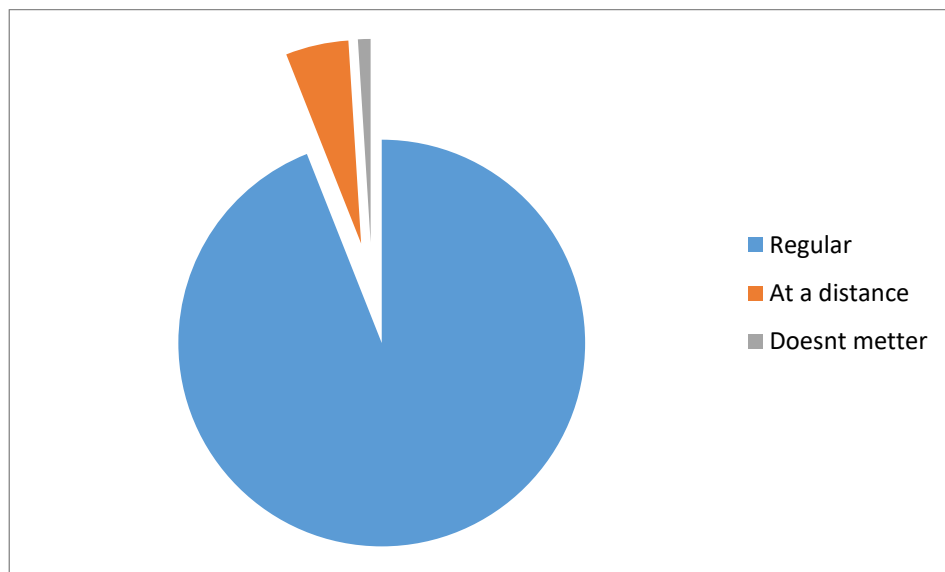


Figure 2: Commitment of pupils to regular and distance learning

The pupils who answered that regular classes are better for them, stated the following reasons:

- We learn better, we hang out, we hear from teachers everything that is important, we learn best in school, because I don't spend most days in front of a device, it's easier.

Students who answered that distance learning is better for them explained:

- It's easier, we don't have to carry books, I don't worry about forgetting something from the accessories, it suits me better.

Distance learning would be improved by reducing the number of classes, extending the duration of classes and assignments sent to them by teachers, they should not arrive outside the regular schedule.

Distance learning was realized by: 95% of pupils through Google classroom, and only 5% of pupils used mobile phones.

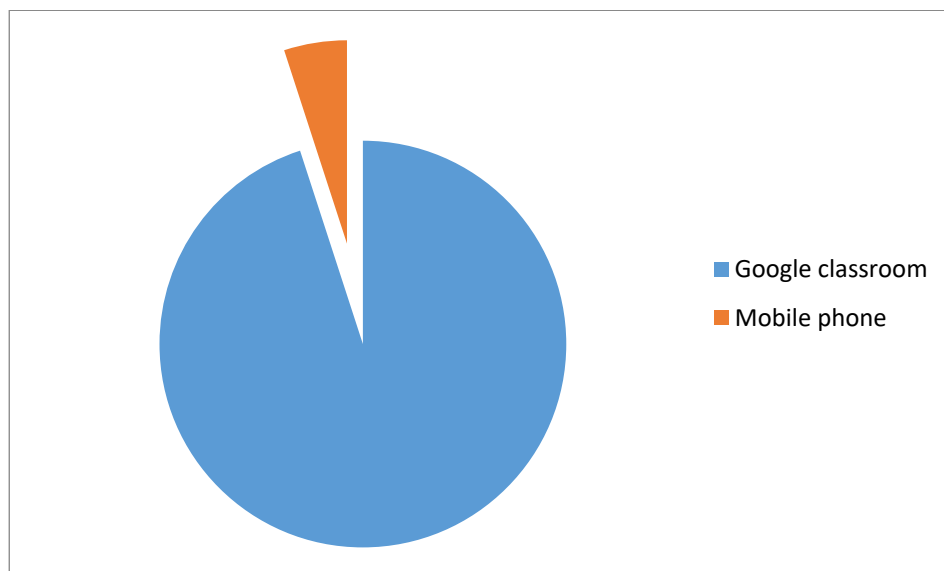


Figure 3: Method of monitoring distance learning

This is a relatively good situation. Pupils who used a mobile phone when distance learning was realized were not in the same position as pupils who could use Google classroom. Phones were used by students who did not have a computer and Internet. The combined method of teaching is a bit better for those pupils because in the current situation they go to school every second day, which gives them the opportunity to ask, explain or get from teachers and friends what they cannot do by mobile phone. The problem of distance learning was with families that have more children, and one TV and computer.

The survey ended with the question, "How many hours a day do you spend in front of a computer?"

The data obtained is worrying because students spend 8-14 hours at the computer, which is 3 times more than last school year when there was no pandemic.

6 Conclusion

Primary school is the foundation of the educational system, it is compulsory and has great significance for other subsystems of the educational system of Serbia. That is why everything it goes through is reflected on high school and colleges. The emergency situation caused by Covid 19, put new demands and problems in front of it. By switching to online classes, there was confusion, wandering and conflicting attitudes due to the speed of transition, the readiness of schools, the ministry and the state itself. A large number of instructions, rules, orders, decrees that the ministry sent to schools, additionally burdened the already burdened teachers. Regardless of the divided opinions on the manner of teaching, its quality and consequences, this situation must teach us not to repeat the same mistakes. As there have been a lot of emergency situations in Serbia, experience should teach us to be more prepared to welcome every next situation. Otherwise it will affect the quality of knowledge. Higher quality of knowledge for each country is also a better resource for its development.

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