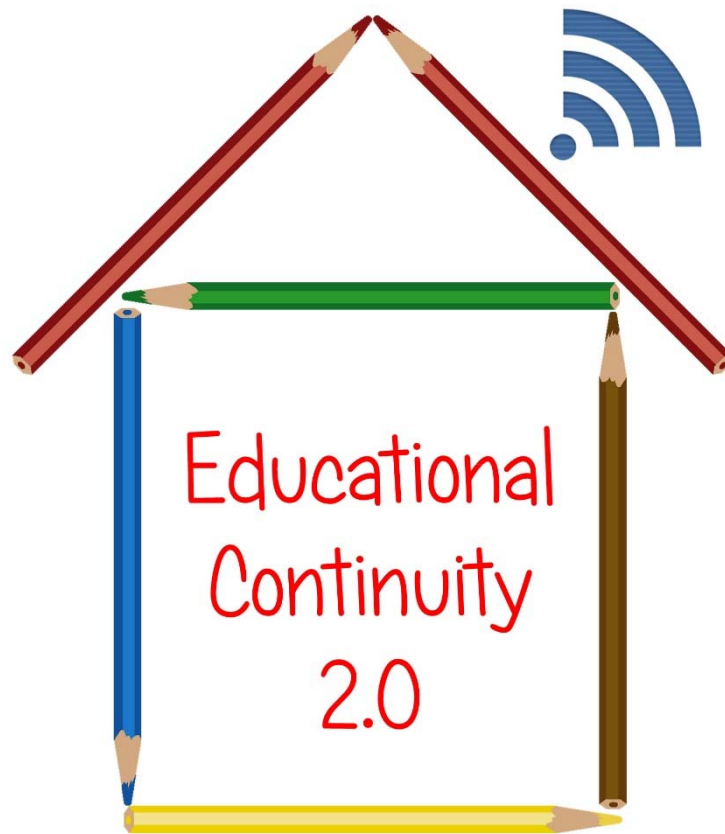




Co-funded by the
Erasmus+ Programme
of the European Union



Educational Continuity 2.0

IO1 – Compact version

May 2021

Final version



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



EDUCATIONAL CONTINUITY 2.0 is a project co-financed by the Erasmus+ Programme, under the Key Activity 2 – Cooperation for innovation and the exchange of good practices for school education

Project no. 2020-1-IT02-KA201-080039

This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication [communication] reflects the views only of the author, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The project “Educational Continuity 2.0.” intends to achieve the following results:

- Exchange good practices aimed at the educational continuity and distance learning, at the European level. We are going to conduct a research survey on innovative distance learning approaches and methodologies, in order to identify the different achievements both in terms of strengthening the student/teacher and the student/teacher/parents’ relationship.
(Intellectual Output 1, or **IO1**)
- Consolidate the professional profile of teachers and the educational skills of parents in the management of distance learning. In this sense, we are going to define a toolkit that promotes awareness on socio-emotional understanding: it will be a theoretical-practical tool for enhancing adults’ resiliency while providing useful information to support students.
(Intellectual Output 2 or **IO2**)
- Define innovative tools for evaluating the quality of distance learning; in this sense, we are going to elaborate and implement an IT tool for assessing the continuity of teaching. This tool will help conduct an accurate analysis on the feasibility of online lessons by considering school and family context; teachers’ skills; available resources; family’s support etc.
(Intellectual Output 3, or **IO3**)

This document corresponds to IO1. It is a shorter version of the full research report, especially created to be translated in all partner languages in order for it to be freely distributed to stakeholders for dissemination purposes.



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We acknowledge the support and funding provided by the European Commission for this research project.

In addition, we gratefully acknowledge the contribution from the Educational Continuity 2.0 research team members:

IO1 – Research Report – Compact version

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Educational Continuity 2.0

an intercultural dialogue for a functional distance learning

The suspension of presential school education has provoked profound transformations in students' learning. Distance learning became a widespread tool for European governments to tackle the health emergency, while often exacerbating socio-economic inequalities. The strength of our Erasmus+ partnership is to curb the ontological and epistemological gap on the impact and resources put in motion by distance learning: "Educational continuity 2.0" gives an answer to its needs, issues and potential for both schools and families.

The project aims to achieve three goals (in project jargon IO, or intellectual outputs):

- IO1: an Analytical report on distance learning;
- IO2: an emotional education toolkit (i.e. a set of theoretical cues on emotions, practical exercises, games, etc.) to face changes in home-school dynamics;
- IO3: a Digital software to analyze individual situations and find effective solutions, while evaluating the intersections between technological, emotional and economic resources.

For the needs of Intellectual Output 1, 3 distinct questionnaires were designed and distributed in the three countries of the participating partners. The questionnaires were distributed to Teachers, Students and Parents with the aim to identify both the problems they faced while involved in distance learning during the pandemic but also the solutions they applied to address them.

This document reports on the findings deriving from the analysis of the questionnaires. In the following sections, each questionnaire is briefly described before the analysis of the collected answers.

Questionnaires used

Three distinct questionnaires were designed for the needs of IO1; one addressed to teachers, one addressed to students and one addressed to parents. The main aim was to understand the average profile of each stakeholder group and then examine the initial reaction to the emergency transition to distance education during the pandemic. For that matter, the main problems that each stakeholder group faced, based on its own perspective were examined, along with the readiness and knowledgeability to address all the emergent issues. For example, knowing how to use several digital tools, having the necessary equipment and knowledge to connect online, but also knowing how to behave and perform within distance education settings were issues to be examined. Furthermore, issues related to the communication and collaboration among the stakeholder groups were considered as important to be researched. Finally, the differentiated teaching approaches applied (or not) in Distance Education settings were examined, in order to see the degree at which teachers can apply educational design techniques and methods which are appropriate to settings other than those in face-to-face teaching.



Findings

A brief report on each questionnaire is presented in this section.

Questionnaire 1 – Teachers

Overall, 52 teachers responded to the questionnaire, distributed as follows: 11 in Portugal, 24 in Greece and 17 in Italy. The teachers appeared to be rather confident with their ICT skills, although they explicitly require more training in digital tools and on the theoretical background of distance education with which they are not as familiar as they should or would like to be. When in distance settings they mainly follow similar teaching approaches as in face-to-face settings. These include home assignments, worksheets and oral examination (for assessment purposes).

Regarding future use, they mainly refer to using simple facilities of digital tools, such as teleconferencing and file sharing. This further highlights the need to focus more on educational design specifically for distance and even blended learning approaches. At the beginning of the pandemic teachers felt rather intimidated with the situation they had to face. They had to learn how to use the necessary tools. When in need of assistance, they mainly turned to their colleagues or the internet (Google search and Facebook groups). That, in combination to the expressed need for further training leads to the concrete conclusion that a transparent assistive mechanism in parallel to the necessary training is of high importance.

The pandemic brought up the need to actively involve parents more in the learning process. In some cases (e.g. younger children) this was rather mandatory as actions from their side were needed in order to exchange material and assignments with the teacher. To an extent the teachers tried to involve them, although that was mainly limited to an informative role (to reassure that instructions and material reached the children).

A problem that emerged was that parents usually sat next to their children (which was more common the younger the children were) and they had the tendency to interfere. This is part of a wider problem of how parents should support their children in learning but also the teachers in teaching, also in normal settings. The need for a mechanism for more fruitful collaboration among teachers and parents was evident overall. During the pandemic they all communicated using tools they already were familiar with in their everyday life and not official communication channels.

Concluding, the collected data clearly reflects the huge effort that the teachers had to put for dealing with the unexpected situation which emerged from the pandemic. On the other hand they also reflect the extent of confusion within the teachers regarding what applies and what doesn't in distance settings when compared with regular teaching. A more fundamental supporting mechanism seems to be a necessity.

Questionnaire 2 – Students

Overall, 56 students responded to the questionnaire, distributed as follows: 9 in Portugal, 15 in Greece and 32 in Italy. Probably the most important finding is that students definitely prefer face-to-face teaching in order to have the opportunity to interact with their friends.



During the pandemic, several technical problems emerged (e.g. internet connectivity and device availability). Usually an adult was at home and most importantly, not working from home, possibly due to the arrangements made by the governments to resolve such problems. But even so, having more than one person present at home eventually emerged as a problem. The latter was twofold: a) internet connection speeds are not high enough to support simultaneous heavy users (teleconferencing needs significant bandwidth), and b) there is usually unwanted noise or not privacy when needed.

Apart from the lack of physical interaction, it was evident that distance education was not implemented in an attractive manner for the students, overall. The parents' involvement was not perceived as increased by the students. Regarding homework, students do not see a significant change both in the difficulty and the amount. On the other hand, they express their need for more support (at least by the teacher).

Concluding, it is obvious that for students school was the same but with no social interaction and less teacher support. They didn't see differences in the workload or the difficulty, not all were very comfortable with being online so much and with the accompanying issues (other people, inappropriate devices, slow internet, etc.). Overall, school obligations seemed as the same for them and this could be interpreted as an indication of faulty or inappropriate educational design. Addressing that can make distance education more attractive and engaging for the students (which is not the case thus far).

Questionnaire 3 – Parents

Overall, 77 parents responded to the questionnaire, distributed as follows: 18 in Portugal, 22 in Greece and 37 in Italy. The results revealed that eventually the availability of connection devices was not a difficult problem to overcome. That doesn't mean that it wasn't an issue overall or that the available devices were always the most appropriate ones (e.g. having children under 9 years old interacting through a smartphone is far from ideal when required on a daily basis and usually that is adequate for teleconferencing only).

Parents did worry for their children and tried to understand how to support them, but it was evident that they didn't know where to turn to for assistance or appropriate information. At the beginning of the pandemic they reached out to schools, took initiatives but obviously it would be better if they had more assistant or clear guidelines. They didn't admit sitting by their children, but that was an issue overall. The lack of proper boundaries is also connected with educational design, as proper design prescribes the role of each involved party in a very clear and explicit manner. Overall, parents were more involved (timewise) but at the same time they are not (quality-wise) in their children's education.

Overall, parents also were unprepared for distance education. A rather significant issue was the available space at home which resulted to privacy and attendance problems for the children. Limited space lead to more distractions being present.

Concluding, it is obvious that for the parents the situation was slightly awkward and they were unprepared to deal with it. They raised concerns about their children in matters of socializing and learning, but they seem to not be knowledgeable or prepared to provide solutions. For that they turn to the school and the teacher. Technical and infrastructural issues manage to



be solved eventually. The psychological, social and cognitive factor seem to be the most important ones and need to be properly addressed.

Conclusions

At the beginning of the pandemic, the United Nations reported that a total of 165 countries implemented Distance Education in all educational levels which resulted in 91.3% of the students in these countries not attending school face to face. Due to the rapid transition to this state, the term Emergency Remote Teaching was also used to describe the situation. This term is defined in the international literature as the sudden and unprepared shifting from a face to face model to a distant model of teaching.

In this setting, all the involved stakeholders (students, teachers and parents) were required to rapidly alter their interaction within the educational context, with no prior preparation. Considering the literature in which it is clearly stated that none of the stakeholders were actually prepared for this emergency remote teaching setting, this document reports upon a survey which aimed at investigating how the stakeholders in the three countries of the consortium dealt with the situation that emerged with the pandemic, the problems and challenges they faced, the ways they addressed them and eventually the possible gaps on a policy level that emerge.

The main conclusion of this survey is that more or less all the stakeholders in all countries were, indeed, unprepared. This is a conclusion which fully complies with the recent literature. The necessary preparation could be related to digital efficacy, educational design efficacy, learning efficacy and facilitation/support efficacy, depending on the category of the stakeholder. To put it simpler, all the involved parties were required to hold ICT competencies in order to use the necessary digital tools and be able to connect, communicate and collaborate online.

Additionally, the questionnaires reveal that the stakeholders preferred to make use of tools they were already familiar with, such as messaging applications (e.g. Messenger, WhatsApp, Viber). This occurred in some cases not only complementarily to the main tools, but rather resulted in such applications being the main communication channel. Of course, the students were the least involved stakeholders in such decisions, especially those of a younger age. Communication was easily established in order to shift to Distance Learning initially via more formal and traditional means (e.g. email, phone) and later on it shifted to other tools.

In the literature and the media, one issue which was often highlighted was the lack of devices within the students' families, but also the teachers for connecting to the internet, and accessing the teaching material and communication tools. The questionnaires in this study show that this was eventually not a significant problem or it was rather easily resolved. It would be interesting in future surveys to examine qualitative aspects of this matter, such as the appropriateness of the devices for the type of the learning activities carried out.

Examining other procedural matters, another problem for the families was the fact that more than one person needed to be online at the same time on many occasions. This was the case



of siblings participating in Distance Education, sometimes in combination with parents having to work from home. Also, almost all the teachers were also parents who had children who were required to attend online classes and those were possibly the more difficult cases as they had to teach online and also support their children in the same process. Overall, self-efficacy of those involved in Distance Education seems to be a significant issue to address for future occasions, as it would relieve support burden from the adults. Of course this is also related to the type of activities involved in Distance Education and the user profile of the involved stakeholders (teachers and especially students).

The presence of other people in the house, especially in the case of larger families, was an issue which resulted in noise and distractions. One could argue that space availability was a more significant problem than device availability, as the latter is rather easily solved, as opposed to the former.

Regarding ICT skills, the questionnaires reveal that initially the stakeholders were not prepared at all to use the designated tools. On the other hand, people are using digital tools every day and thus they are knowledgeable enough in areas such as internet access and use, communication and basic material access. This is a significant capital on which Distance Education can build upon, as this was not the case about 10 years ago when tablets and smartphones were not even introduced yet.

Examining the difficulties that all the stakeholders faced during the pandemic, this survey complies with the literature. There was a lack of official support during the process which lead the stakeholder to seek assistance in two main directions: official channels (school for the parents and directorates or ministries for the teachers) and social contacts (e.g. colleagues, friends and family). In the literature it has been documented over the years that people tend to search for answers in a learning situation from their peers. But in this case, it seems that two actions should be part of the official plans in all countries: a) training programs for all the stakeholders (including parents), and b) official guidelines in order to reassure a minimum level of understanding what the basic steps for participating in Distance Education are (even for uniformity reasons). Another conclusion is that when in need, the stakeholders seem to be able to find answers and solutions but it is preferable to be proactive on the official side.

As for training needs, apart from digital competences, interestingly enough stakeholder referred to training on psychological issues in order for the teachers to manage their classes and the parents to support their children and even themselves. Reducing physical activity and interaction in combination with having to sit in front of an electronic device for many hours per day is an uncommon situation and people are in need of information on how to deal with this situation. This refers not only to simple health matters (e.g. prevention of possible musculoskeletal problems), but also psychological matters which may arise from reduced social interaction. This is a type of training that should be designed and implemented by official and trustworthy channels (e.g. ministries and universities).

The fact that teachers selected Educational Design as an area in which they require training is a very important outcome of this survey. Examining other answers more qualitatively, one can see that most of the teachers followed similar approaches in distance settings; they distributed worksheets, assigned homework, lectured synchronously. When explicitly asked



on the teaching approach they followed in distance settings, “the same” was the most selected answer by the teachers. This is also evident by questions regarding assessment methods, but also the perception of students and parents. The majority of the participants commented mainly upon the workload and not the qualitative aspects of the teaching interaction. In some cases, various digital tools were mentioned, but it seems that mainly simple functionalities were used (e.g. file sharing).

Overall, teachers were not prepared in matters of educational design. Distance Education requires very different teaching activities in order to provoke participation, enhance engagement, facilitate collaboration and self-paced learning. Mentoring, facilitation, moderating and other relevant topics have been discussed in the literature for several years. It is clear, also from this study that teachers are not familiar with these terms or the differentiated teaching required in distance settings. This is a significant and concrete conclusion of this study which is also tightly connected to the Educational Continuity 2.0 project and the designed outputs.

Another interesting observation is the contradicting answers that parents and teachers provided regarding their behavior during synchronous sessions. It is clear that appropriate training and guidelines could resolve this issue, along with proper educational design. By implementing teaching activities similar to the ones in face to face setting, it is easier to allow such occurrences. Instead, there are collaborative and technology-based activities appropriate for synchronous teaching that could make the parents’ intervention obsolete. Some of them are integrated in the platforms that were officially selected in the countries where this survey was carried out, but the teachers didn’t report utilizing them.

Summarizing, a categorization of the supporting needs for all the stakeholders can be made, based on the provided responses. The designated areas are presented also in Table 1. The first level in which quick response was required during the emergent shifting to distance education was that of technical infrastructure and initialization of facilities (e.g. creating accounts for the students in online platforms). This includes the acquisition of devices, setting up internet connection and tuning collaborative platforms. Although overwhelming at the beginning, it is evident that all the stakeholders were able to address such issues. The survey reveals that all of them were able to participate, although minor technical problems were always observed, but this is a matter of national infrastructures.

The second level is that of intra-family well-being and interaction. Issues falling under this category were: a) the necessary privacy of students who participated in distance education, b) time availability for learning, recreational and other activities, c) relationships among family members, and d) necessary knowledge directly related to distance education. Privacy is an issue difficult to resolve, as it is related to the size of each family and their residence. The second is directly related to educational design which affects the implementation of distance teaching, but also the nature of the corresponding activities, the workload, the required time and the timing of addressing the learning workload. Most of the teachers followed similar teaching approaches as those in face to face settings. Consequently, training and support is necessary. For the relationships among family members, some support could be considered in the form of training programs, informative leaflets, instructions and proposed



actions/activities which include relationship management, mindfulness, etc. Lastly, the survey highlighted the need for both parents and students to receive additional training and information/knowledge on all issues related to distance education (both technical and learning related).

The third level is that of the family-school relationship. What the survey reveals is that in some cases the most convenient communication means were utilized (e.g. messaging applications, phone interaction) and in other cases the communication was more typical (e.g. email with instructions at the beginning or occasionally). One thing that was very clear was the fact that frequent and well-established means of communication among families and schools are not established, especially ones that take into account the types of communication among teachers and parents. For example, means of regular announcements which are connected to the extroversion of the schools and the awareness of the parents on where to find useful guidelines and announcements seems to not have been resolved yet, despite the fact that most people are regular internet users. A clear communication protocol could eliminate communication noise, reduce conflict management needs and enhance necessary response in more emergent situations. Most important, transparency and a common ground of understanding by such protocols would eliminate misinformation which could lead to unwanted or unpleasant situations. There is a lack of supporting mechanisms in technical matters, but also psychological and other matters. It would be important for the school unit to act as a place to which parents could turn to for support on all issues related to their children's learning and growth. But despite the fact that this is an issue related to educational policy and the availability of trained professionals (e.g. psychologists), clear communication protocols and channels can facilitate time allocation in various supporting actions and mechanisms.

The fourth level is that of teacher-student interaction. The survey highlights that teachers initially, and for most of the duration of the pandemic, attempted to implement in distance settings similar teaching approaches as those in face to face settings. All stakeholders mentioned that, for example, focusing on learning was a challenge. Not all the available digital tools were utilized nor their functionalities. Overall, it seems that the digital tools were underutilized. It is not clear if the home workload for students was increased or not, but the need to involve the parents more was evident in the responses. All of these are issues of educational design which involves (among others): a) types of activities (e.g. setting up synchronous and asynchronous collaboration and interaction), b) designing different teaching material, c) designing different levels of engagement for the students, d) involving the parents, and e) establishing different assessment and interaction methods. Within the activities' types and design, those aiming at facilitating social interaction, mindfulness and group well-being cannot be neglected. Also, issues related to self-paced learning, asynchronous learning and interaction are also important. All these require training, support and the presence of suggesting mechanisms (what to do, when and how to do it) for the teacher who is overwhelmed with information and was required to find solutions in an emergency situation over the past year. These are issues tightly connected to the outputs of the Educational Continuity 2.0 project and justify its design.



Although already mentioned, the student-student social interaction can be considered as a separate and significant category. The literature provides theoretical models and grounds for this (e.g. social presence in online community settings). There are quick activities and differentiated teaching approaches which can enhance students' social interaction even within the teaching activities. Collaboration scripts in Computer Supported Collaborative Learning (CSSL), approaches such as spaced learning, creative intermissions and other ideas can facilitate this interaction, further supporting social aspects which arise when in distance settings. For all those issues which are also related to educational design, as teaching is not only about knowledge transmission-acquisition but for individual development overall, all stakeholders need additional training and support.

Table 1: Categorized overview of issues to consider in distance education

Caterory	Requirements	Solutions	Timing and result
Infrastructure	Devices Internet connection Collaboration platforms and tools	Purchasing Upgrading if possible Setup and tuned	First stage response. Addressed
Intra-family	Privacy Time for learning Family time Relationships Distance Education knowledge	Depends on family & residence Educational design Educational design Training, support Training, support	Difficult to address Needs addressing Needs addressing Needs addressing Needs addressing
Family-School	Communication patterns & channels Support	Establishment of communication protocol and means Psychology, technical	Confusing at first, needs to be clarified and communicated Needs addressing
Student-teacher	Teaching/learning	Educational design	Needs addressing
Student-student	Social interaction	Educational design	Needs addressing

As a concluding remark, the survey indicated that the involved stakeholders were able to address the emergent need to shift to distance education, but it also highlighted systemic problems that exist overall. They all need to be aware of the parameters influencing the quality of education overall in distance settings and training/support in order to carefully evaluating and selecting the most appropriate approach for implementing distance education. The Educational Continuity 2.0 project aims at addressing this exact issue through the designed outputs.