

Deconstructing the Concept for Distance Learning: Education in Times of Covid-19

Policy brief #40



Problem: More than half a million people in Macedonia, directly as students (about 250,000), or indirectly as parents and guardians are affected by the online education that took place from March to June. Left alone, in most cases, students and their parents got their assignments through Viber groups, and with little, if any, interaction with the teacher, they learned the lessons. The role of the educator was almost entirely transferred to the parent, and not all parents were able to undertake it (due to lack of education, skills and time). The CRPM Monitoring report on the gender and diversity impact of Covid 19 response measures determines that the way education was implemented in the March-June period influenced on institutionalizing dominant gender roles, where women take care of the family and children's education; increasing the inequalities by mainly affecting labor market participation of women. This measure singlehandedly will destroy all women economic empowerment efforts the country has taken for decades¹. Undoubtedly, not all families will be economically ready to take this burden, nor will have the knowledge and skills to deliver the same education quality as the educated teachers. Single parents had the most difficulties. The quality of the contents was questionable, at least. "The teachers were sending whatever they could find at the moment on the internet, most of it from unreliable sources, using

¹ http://www.crpm.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/CRPM-Covid-19-%D0%B8-%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%B4%D0%BE%D1%82_ENG.pdf

nonstandard language and obviously without quality control of the BDE and the SEI”². The children lost sense that they are in education process as the most important element of socialization and interaction was missing.

The CRPM Monitoring report on the gender and diversity impact of Covid 19 response measures determines that the extremely poor, children with uneducated parents, children without access to internet and computer were left without the universal right to education during Covid19, while primary and secondary education is compulsory in the country. No measures were taken for these children to be supported in the time of lockdown. The latest IPIS survey shows that 82.1% of the citizens with school age children have adequate means for online education, while 10% said they did not have any means for this type of learning³. In absence of digital tools, digital contents and without adequate support (psychological and contextual), the school year for the teachers, students and parents ended with a feeling that this solution was a failure⁴.

Suggested solution: On July 6, Ministry of Education published a concept of developing distance learning for students in primary and secondary schools⁵, which is open for public consultations until 10 July. The provided time for consultations is too short for such a big step, and the timing it has been implemented, during a pre-election campaign, does not provide room for serious expert debate and provision of constructive feedback to policy makers. However, since the institutions must have time to prepare for the new school year, we believe that it is important for the Concept to be reviewed by all stakeholders, and as a think-tank to provide constructive recommendations for improving the concept in order to increase the quality of education compared to that provided during Covid-19 from March to June 2020.

The solution – Concept for distance learning contains guidelines for education policies, improving education technology and pedagogy. The concept gives an overview of the political

² CRPM Monitoring report on the gender and diversity impact of Covid 19 response measures, unpublished manuscript

³ <https://24info.mk/%D0%B4%D0%B5%D1%82%D0%B5%D0%BA%D1%82%D0%BE%D1%80-%D0%B0%D0%BD%D0%BA%D0%B5%D1%82%D0%B0-%D0%BE%D0%BD%D0%BB%D0%B0%D1%98%D0%BD-%D0%BD%D0%B0%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B0%D0%B2%D0%B0%D1%82%D0%B0-%D0%B5-%D0%BD%D0%B0/>

⁴ <https://www.slobodnaevropa.mk/a/%D0%BF%D0%B0%D1%80%D1%82%D0%B8%D0%B8-%D0%BE%D0%BD%D0%BB%D0%B0%D1%98%D0%BD-%D0%BE%D0%B1%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%B7%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%B0%D0%BD%D0%B8%D0%B5-%D0%BA%D0%B0%D0%BC%D0%BF%D0%B0%D1%9A%D0%B0/30704311.html?fbclid=IwAR2A37GfZ5toKFG8zGN7IZ730IJ2JbfxvFdhJsgosQJRYdoUJxb41HCUEyg>

⁵ http://mrk.mk/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/%D0%9A%D0%BE%D0%BD%D1%86%D0%B5%D0%BF%D1%82-%D0%B7%D0%B0-%D0%B4%D0%B0%D0%BB%D0%B5%D1%87%D0%B8%D0%BD%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%BE-%D0%BE%D0%B1%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%B7%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%B0%D0%BD%D0%B8%D0%B5-%D1%84%D0%B8%D0%BD%D0%B0%D0%BB%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D0%B2%D0%B5%D1%80%D0%B7%D0%B8%D1%98%D0%B0_.pdf

and legal framework of distance learning and the existing technical preparations to implement the new education concept.

- The concept replaces the didactic triangle (teacher-contents-student) and promotes the didactic pentagon (teacher-contents-student-parent-technology).
- Key change is the role of the teacher, who now from lecturer becomes a mentor. As the education is not going to be delivered in schools the concept recognizes that the teacher can no longer prepare teaching materials considering the classroom environment. It also reveals that teachers are not ready to deliver this semi-programmed learning process. It is foreseen for the teachers to use presentations, animations, video and audio recordings, maps and simulations. Techniques for which most of the teachers are not skilled to use in teaching. The concept does not provision decrease in the number of teachers (currently over 26,000).
- The most important change with the greatest influence on the whole society and the economy is the role of the parent who takes over all organization activities for their children's education, becoming educators explaining the contents to their children, and at the same time controllers of their education results. This means that one parent should be fully dedicated to the children's education. The support for the parents in this process is not predicted.
- Technology becomes crucial. The Ministry of education and science is planned to develop a national platform for digital contents where all teachers will create the contents, handouts and share them with each other. The concept reviews all capacities and technological solution the Ministry and other educational institutions have, but it
- does not give concrete recommendation if one should be upgraded into a platform, or a new platform will be created. Nevertheless, it is clear that the platform will not be available in 2020 but the commitment is taken for 2022. This suggests that rapid solution to the problem of materials and homework submission will not be resolved for the academic 2020-2021 school year. The concept basis its measures on the presumption that internet and computer is available to every kid in every home, for personal use of at least 4 hours. But as we know from the IPIS survey this is not so. In addition, it is provisioned using handouts and preparing homework that will inevitably require also use of a printer and maybe a scanner in each household, a fact that is overlooked.
- The online classes are planned to last 2 hours per day for children in primary school and 3 hours per day for children in lower secondary and high school. While the interaction with the teacher is limited to 30 minutes, of which 15 for lecturing and 15 for interaction (discussion, questions and answers) with students. It is recommended to assign long-term assignments and projects for individual work.
- Formative assessment of the knowledge should be transformed and the knowledge of facts, due to their availability on the internet, to be avoided, and the focus should be shifted to knowing what's important when doing formative assessments of knowledge. The question is whether the teachers are ready for such transformation and whether they are trained to pursue such assessment. Games and creating wiki contents and
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- blogging is introduced as an assessment method. The assessment will include giving feedback to the student and the parent/guardian.

CRPM COMMENTS TO THE CONCEPT AS A POLICY DOCUMENT

- Ministry of Education gave **extremely short time (4 days) for consultation** of such an important step in the reform of the delivery of education in the academic 2020-2021 if the Covid 19 circumstances persist. Considering the solutions offered will affect approximately half a million people and more we believe that due attention needs to be given. What is more the concept mentions gathering data on the impact of Covid 19 but does not take the lessons learned in its design which makes the policy proposal irrelevant to the needs and interests of the half a million people tackled directly and indirectly by the proposal. The very fact that the concept was presented and the consultation done in the middle of political campaign, harms the perception for the effort to be unbiased and ability for the process to be implemented all inclusively. One might note that even the rapid tenders have longer deadlines than the consultation period for concept of distant learning provided by the Ministry of education and science.
- **There is no expert debate organized.** The expert audience must be consulted and the whole epistemic community in education and digitalization of services must be included considering that this is a pioneer step in our country. Otherwise the whole concept and reform will be smuggled, and implemented without taking in consideration
- possible negative impact; and consequently will change our lives and the economy, make the citizens more dissatisfied with the institutions and the government; will take away the right to education of the poor, without internet access and to children whose parents are not well education and do not have time to implement the concept in practice, while the right to education is universal and guaranteed.
- **The concept of distance learning without additional measures considering the different needs of the population will not be able to achieve the goal of delivering quality education in Covid-19 environment. It will create larger inequality gap (gender⁶ and social⁷) in the society and will result in generally lower education results and decrease the human capital in the country on long-term basis.**
- The concept of distance learning assesses the capacities to implement distance learning; the concept contains directions for education policies, education technology and pedagogy. **The concept is made only from institutions' perspectives and does not consider teachers', parents' and students' needs** that will bear the greatest burden of implementation. Hence, the concept does not provide:

⁶CRPM completed overall analysis of the Covid-19 influence of gender equality using intersectoral approach

⁷There is still no evaluation of the Covid-19 impact to poverty, but regarding the effect on the economy, great poverty is expected.

- Overview of the activities that the Ministry of Education and Science SHOULD AND MUST undertake to improve teachers' knowledge and skills to implement programmed and semi-programmed learning, prepare digital learning materials and perform formative assessment that needs to be implemented. **Without adequate training and continuous support for the teachers by Bureau for Development of Education (BDE) to implement the distance learning concept, teachers will be left alone to deliver education themselves, which puts at risk the whole education process.**
- Overview of the measures that will be taken to ensure ACCESS to distance learning to ALL students/families. This includes internet access, having computer and probably printer/scanner. The right to education is guaranteed and the country obliged to provide compulsory and free primary and secondary education for ALL. **Without providing technical preconditions for all children to attend the classes, the distance learning concept is impossible to implement.**
- Overview of all measures to be taken in order to provide BENEFIT from the distance learning for all students/families. Interaction with the teacher is so minor that the organization of the process, the support in learning the matter and control of the knowledge is transferred to the parent for whom there is NO SUPPORT at all. Not all parents have knowledge, skills and time to implement the concept. The compulsory mentor support from the teacher with certain number of classes is not predicted. Nor is predicted replacement for the parent
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- support in those cases where it is impossible for the parent to provide educational support to
- their child without endangering their existence (e.g. single parents). **Without providing support for the parents (including replacement model) in the implementation process of distance learning, the concept is impossible to implement.** The concept does not look into changing the calendar of the school year, although it might provide benefit of interaction if the warmer months (May – August) are used for outdoor learning with respect to measures of physical distancing, while from December to March to be free, or with online learning.
- Overview of the measures to be undertaken in order to ensure MONITORING AND QUALITY CONTROL of the educational process and achievement of learning results. The concept predicts self-evaluation for teachers, formative and summative assessment of the students, but not quality control of the education process, materials and tools used. In addition, parents' and students' satisfaction and lessons learning is not provisioned in the process of improvement the distance learning model. **Without providing quality control**

of the education process and results, we cannot achieve the goals of the new approach to education in times of Covid-19.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Revise the concept taking in consideration the experiences and lessons learned from the March - June period and provide solutions to the real problems
- Organize a wide consultation involving all education specialists, all interest groups and the expert community working on digitalization of services
- Integrate in the concept and the design of the distance learning services the perspectives of children, parents and teachers
- Provision measures to improve teachers' knowledge and skills to implement programmed and semi-programmed learning, prepare digital learning materials and perform formative assessment that needs to be implemented
- Introduce quality control of digital materials and guidance and support for their development by SEI and BDE
- Provision support for the 10% of children that do not have access to internet or computer
- Adapt the concept to the needs of students, schools are for acquiring socialization skills through interaction. While longer projects are provisioned, there is nothing on team work, group work and interaction with the teacher/mentor for more than 15 minutes a day in the concept.
- Provision support to families that cannot dedicate 8 hours (4 hours per each kid, on average 2 kids per family) for supporting education process of their children
- Change the school year calendar to provide benefit of interaction by organizing outdoor schooling in the warmer months (May – August) with respect to measures of physical distancing, while from December to March to be free, or with online learning.