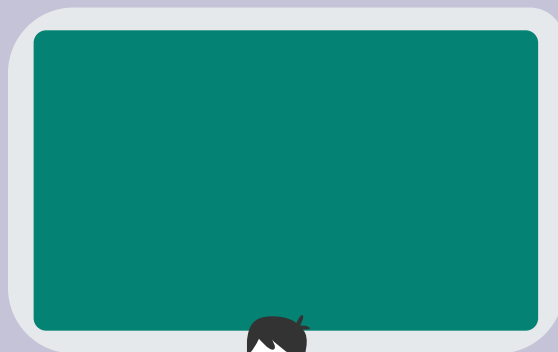# ANALYTICAL REPORT

Pupils and the pandemic: Virtual versus on-site learning experience

EduPod 1

KEC
Qendra për Arsim e Kosovës
Kosova Education Center

The project Innovating Development for Education Advancement - **IDEA 2022**, is funded by the Office of the European Union in Kosovo (EUOK) and implemented by Kosova Education Center (KEC). With the aim to improve the quality of education, the project seeks to identify core issues in the field of education in Kosovo by expanding opportunities for public debate by means of podcasts as innovative technology. These discussions include key parties involved in the education system, such as students, teachers, parents, policymakers etc. who come together to share their thoughts compare points of view.

The series of podcasts **EduPod** is the first of its kind in Kosovo, as the first podcast that focuses specifically on issues of education in this form. EduPod seeks to expand the outreach of education debate by allowing the voices of all parties to be heard, with special focus on students themselves. These analytical reports contain summaries of the discussions and recommendations from the podcasts.

Design: *envinion*

ANALYTICAL REPORT

Pupils and the pandemic: Virtual versus on-site learning experience

Introduction

EduPod, the first podcast of specific educational/instructional character in Kosovo, was produced on March 23rd, 2022, in the framework of the project Innovating Development for Education Advancement – IDEA 2022 project, funded by the Office of the European Union in Kosovo and implemented by Kosova Education Center (KEC). IDEA 2022 seeks to improve the quality of education by organizing broad-based public debates to identify and address education issues in Kosovo. This podcast, the first of a series of podcasts planned for this program year, hosted a conversation between different parties involved in the education system in Kosovo, with pupils being the key participants, followed by teachers and parents.

Pupils are the primary users as well as end users of education products, and they are also the party with the greatest potential to provide direct contribution to addressing challenges. One of the goals of the podcast was to expand the space for public debate, giving children the opportunity to express themselves about the impact of online classes during the pandemic. **Teachers** carry the important burden of knowledge transfer in education/instruction institutions. During the pandemic, they had to adapt quickly to online classes, despite the fact that many of them had no sufficient knowledge and experience to use the right technology. On the other hand, **parents** faced other challenges while their children attended online classes from home, where they had to support their children primarily in spontaneous ways. Creating conditions for distance learning, providing sufficient technological equipment and internet access, are only some of the factors that affected this situation. Bearing in mind the topic of the debate, a **distance learning expert** was also invited to the podcast, since distance education is no longer seen only as a method used due to the pandemic, but is increasingly being considered an integral part of education and instruction practices across the world.

The participants in the discussion were:

Lisa Lohaj, 8th grade pupil at "Model" school in Prishtina

Arta Demolli, teacher of Geography at "Model" school in Prishtina

Anita Plakolli, member of the Leading Board of the Parents' Council for the Municipality of Prishtina and Development Director at Teach for Kosova (TFK) organization

Antigona Uka, Executive Director at Kosovo Center for Distance Education (KCDE).

The outline of the discussion during EduPod 1 was drafted in close collaboration between the expert hired as a consultant to produce the podcast and the IDEA 2022 Project Manager. Thus, a balanced number of questions were prepared for each guest, regarding their distance learning experiences. Bearing in mind the principles of gender equality, the initial plan included 4 guests with equal representation (2 women/girls, 2 men/boys), but it had to change due to last-minute unavailability of some participants. The podcast lasted 45 minutes, and throughout the discussion the moderator made sure to give guests equal room to express their opinions.

EduPod 1 **was livestreamed on KEC Facebook page, and by March 31st, 2022 it reached**

2,193 viewers → **537** of whom **reacted and/or commented and forwarded or shared the post.**

Meanwhile, in the first 24 hours alone it attracted about **1,000** **views.**

The audio-video recording of the podcast was published on KEC YouTube channel, the audio version (mp3) was broadcast on Radio Kosova, and it was also posted on the podcast site of Nacionale media platform. EduPod 1 can be accessed any time by clicking on the following links:

KEC Facebook Page:
https://www.facebook.com/QendraperArsimeKosoves/videos/5478305605522283

KEC official YouTube channel:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tQaZDvTK4jk&t=6s

Two of the participants in the podcast are members of the civil society organizations Kosovo Center for Distance Education (KCDE) and Teach for Kosova (TFK), both of which are members of the informal network of CSOs in pre-university education established as part of the project IDEA 2022. The activities of this network include the educational/instructional Education Podcast Society (EPS), which will focus on podcast debates. The results of this podcast, as well as the next four podcasts to be developed by IDEA 2022 will be analyzed and addressed by EPS, in order for network member organizations to take joint action and launch advocacy initiatives in the field of education.

Discussions

During the first part of this podcast, the guests discussed in general about the challenges encountered during the organization and delivery of distance learning, as a solution provided by the Kosovo Ministry of Education, Science, Technology and Innovation (MESTI) in the wake of Covid-19 pandemic in 2020. In the second part, the guests highlighted the opportunities presented during this journey and the advantages of distance learning compared to learning with physical presence in the classroom.

The pupil Lisa Lohaj said that the pandemic situation was quite challenging for her, in particular with the frightening situation overall, but also having to use digital devices and various online platforms. She said that she did not like online school very much at first, but then she embraced it knowing that home learning was intended to protect people from the virus, and this made the situation bearable. The main difficulty that Lisa pointed out during this podcast was related to the use of various platforms for online classes, which the students used for the first time during the pandemic. She watched various online tutorials on how to use these platforms, and added that Zoom was the easiest platform to use. Lisa also acknowledged the support of her parents and teachers in mastering the use of these platforms.

Regarding the advantages of distance learning, Lisa stated that this method offers opportunities to further develop digital research skills, as well as to develop autonomous learning. On the other hand, since distance learning takes place at home, the likelihood of distractions during classes is higher due to the family environment and lack of privacy during classes.

Lisa mentioned the fact that, although her generation uses the Internet more than all previous generations, she and her peers are still not sufficiently prepared in the effective use of electronic platforms for educational/instructional purposes. Finally, she added that she would not have replaced classroom learning with distance learning, because, according to her, the school environment in general and the physical presence of teachers, and friends in particular, make the classroom a more suitable environment for work and study.

Teacher Arta Demolli from "Model" school in Prishtina stated that her school started online classes 10 days after the announcement of Covid-19 as a global pandemic by the World Health Organization. Specifically, her school used the Zoom platform and www.eshkollori.com. As a key challenge Arta mentioned the lack of technology equipment among pupils, which prevented many of them from attending virtual classes. This is why the participation of pupils in online classes was not always at a satisfactory level, although many pupils would watch video lessons on Kosovo's public television broadcaster. This, according to Arta, helped most pupils attend classes from home. Arta also showed that, due to the lack of digital competencies in the education community, virtual classes were often boring for pupils.

As an advantage of distance learning Arta emphasized the development of digital skills among her colleagues, as well as among pupils. She pointed out that before the pandemic teachers did not use technology as a tool

in the teaching process, while now even after returning to school the use of technology has become the norm, and a new standard has been set in their school. Arta said that now her school staff hold various online meetings, including various teacher professional development trainings. On the other hand, pupils now also use more technology to research topics from school subjects. During 2016-2017, her school used the SchoolMe platform created by KEC, which provided teaching materials and ways to test pupils' knowledge. This is considered to have served to some extent in preparation for virtual learning.

On the other hand, online teaching often enabled the establishment of direct links between teachers and the pupils in a closer and individualized way - something that did not happen before during regular classroom teaching. This facilitated communication and created closeness, providing support and smoothing out the learning process

Arta explained that she did not attend any training related to the development of digital skills for teachers, and stressed that such training would be welcome. According to her, such trainings would make teachers feel more confident in using technology and providing quality and effective distance learning.

From her perspective as **a mother, Anita Plakolli,** a member of the Parents' Council Leading Board, raised a number of issues and challenges. First, she said there was a deepening of inequalities among pupils as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, besides the enigmatic situation that was upsetting for the children, as well as the unpreparedness of the Kosovo education system for emergency situations. According to Anita, the main obstacle to online learning during the pandemic was the use of several different platforms by schools. In this way both children and parents found it difficult to become familiar with all the platforms. Anita pointed out that her children needed constant assistance during online classes, because it often happened that eshkollori was down and the virtual class had to be continued on another platform.

Regarding the use of Viber for teacher-pupil communications, Anita said that she did not support this idea. A number of other parents also did not welcome it, because they were constantly being burdened with messages and child protection policies were not observed. She added that some children were contacted on Viber without parental permission.

On the other hand, Anita stated that the pupil-teacher-parent triangle was strengthened during the pandemic, because all parties understood each other's work better and obtained an increased awareness of each-other's role and importance. She reported that as a mother she was able to see in real time the difficulties faced by teachers during virtual classes, such as retaining pupils' attention, maintaining the classroom atmosphere, etc. Thus, the pandemic highlighted the values of those teachers who were diligent and creative under such conditions. They did their best during this time to keep pupils interested and informed as much as possible, while parents were forced to work even harder with their children to create the suitable conditions for the uninterrupted conduct of the learning process.

Anita also underlined that, in the era we are living, distance learning should be offered in addition to classroom learning. She believes that hybrid learning, some days at school and some days at home, would be the right combination to develop 21st century skills in pupils. She believes that such a thing is possible if state institutions would focus more on this area.

Antigona Ukaj from KCDE reconfirmed that research conducted by their center has revealed the same facts regarding the difficulties of online learning, including pupils' fear of the situation, lack of digital equipment, and inadequate preparation of teachers for distance learning. Antigona stressed that about 4-5% of pupils in the 12 largest municipalities in Kosovo did not attend school at all during the pandemic precisely due to lack of digital tools. This fact also indicates the aggravated socio-economic situation of our society in this difficult and unprecedented period.

As a good connoisseur of her field of expertise, Antigona explained that there are two types of distance learning: *asynchronous* and *synchronous*. Asynchronous learning is a learning strategy that does not require real-time interaction, and pupils can interact with the course content in their own time. Synchronous learning refers to learning at the same time but not from the same place, in other words virtual learning or e-learning. Both these forms can be used in combination with each other and with classroom learning at the same time. Antigona noted that the studies conducted support the idea of combined learning, and that pupils who are exposed to combined learning have higher achievements. Meanwhile, Kosovo pupils are digital natives and are able to retrieve information effectively through electronic platforms.

Antigona drew attention to the importance of digitalizing the education system, adding that this process is multidimensional and includes not only the simple transition from traditional to distance learning, but also the provision of infrastructure, use of relevant software, trainings for teachers and other parties, as well as providing the necessary materials. Specifically, KCDE is promoting the idea that schools in Kosovo should offer at least two subjects virtually during the school year, in order for the acquisition of digital skills to happen naturally. Since August 2021 KCDE is also offering the *"Online teaching at the right level"* training for teachers, for which according to Antigona there is a lot of interest among teachers. So far, 60 teachers have been trained, but the demand is very high, with over 700 applications received. It is hoped that other organizations will join these efforts in order to meet the demand.

Finally, Antigona reiterated that digitalization is multidimensional and requires equipment, infrastructure, regulation, operating instructions and training. It has been observed that children who had early access to technology are now software engineers and get paid very well. This is the era in which we live, and the state should consider this a priority in the context of economic development in the country. Specifically, our young men and women are selling their digital skills abroad, and it would be an advantage for Kosovo if they put their skills at the service of their own country. This is the biggest benefit of digitalization.

Conclusions

Participants in EduPod 1 agreed that combining virtual learning with physical presence in the classroom is the best way forward. The advantages of such a combination are manifold, and their usefulness is long-term.

Virtual learning:
- Provides numerous opportunities for the development of pupils' and teachers' skills in the use of technology for education/instruction purposes;
- Creates space for the development of pupils' research skills;
- Increases pupils' sense of autonomy and self-confidence during the knowledge acquisition process;
- Prepares children to join the global community of virtual education, and subsequently the global job market as adults.

In-person learning in the classroom:
- Provides conditions for continuous socialization of pupils with peers, as an important element of healthy psycho-social development of children;
- Assists in the concrete delivery of classes in subjects like physical education or other classes of applied nature;
- Creates opportunities for the use of individual teaching methods, which mainly benefits children with special needs, pupils who learn more effectively in the classroom than virtually, etc.