# The Participatory Behaviour and the Students' Adaptability in the Online Environment during the Pandemic

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**Abstract**: *Changing the relational environment from face-to-face to the online one led to new problems regarding the student classroom's functionality, which led to the students' difficulties in relation to the new situation and the adaptability process. In this new context brought by the pandemic, the relationship's dynamic between student's changes, as well as the one between students and teachers. The endeavour includes the analysis of a small group of students, who resorted to therapy throughout the lockdown, to remit the difficulties that emerged due to the teaching environment's change from face-to-face to the online medium. The objectives' focus highlighted the participatory behaviour's optimization of the students in the new conditions, the enhancement of the students' wellbeing's, in order to optimally face the teaching process and finish the academic year.*

**Keywords:** *online, student, therapy, adaptability, wellbeing.*

## 1. Introduction

Our interactional space has suddenly shifted with the lockdown and the electronic devices have gained a much more important role in our life, as well as more diverse functions than before. For all of us the impact was different and it brought various difficulties, but even in this completely new context, it was easier for the adults than it was for the children. The latter process the difficulties differently, especially as they did not encounter so many things as the adults, but also through the fact that their personal resources related to fighting the adversities are in the formation process. One issue that the children who were going to school faced at all levels was the whole teaching process' shift to the online environment. Our world is continuously changing, but in recent times, these alterations became increasingly volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA). When we thought our world could not undergo any more changes, a bigger alteration than we expected occurred, brought by the pandemic. In this stressful environment, what we knew about us, what we thought about our capabilities, what we had in our relationships with others, personally and professionally can be compromised by a lack of ability to achieve the new and different insights and our own personal understanding. All of these changed our connection to ourselves and the others (Stillmann et al., 2017).

Due to the relationships' role in our lives, they are impregnated emotionally and so the others' attitudes and behavior are important to us and determine our emotional reactions. Moreover, our way of being involved in relationships gives us our proclivity towards action and the adaptive tendencies. In school, students can create an adequate teaching-learning space, through their way of being and acting through participating in group's activities, and through their method of defining their role within the group. So, the relationships' meanings and our tendencies to take action are correlated and they give us the relationship between individual and environment from a point of view regarding adaptability which creates our own wellbeing (Lazarus, 2011). The constructivist perspectives attach a significant importance to learning through collaboration and the schoolmates' role within this process, due to the daily social interaction (Cristescu, 2008). Cooperation enhances the attitudes towards the classroom, the social dynamic and so we can go through the learning process easily (Barnett, 2018) and more pleasantly. All of these were superseded by the new conditions brought by the activities' shift from an integral classroom to an online environment. Our behavior, activity, reactions, are equally triggered by internal and external factors, an ensemble which creates a state

of dissociation and tension which puts the organism in motion until it decreases the tension and it rediscovers its own integrity. Our conduit is an answer to a motivation, triggering all of our motion, physical, and psychological components to reach the proposed goals and the adaptability to the situations that occurred (Miller & Rollnick, 2002). Faced with the new online conditions, the main activities correlated to the classroom changed their form, quality, interactions dynamic, and these led to abrupt and numerous changes that became stress inducing. Uncertainty loomed over all of them– the disease's appearance, the time span in which we will stay indoors, the way in which the academic year will finish. Regarding the end of the academic year, the students in their final years were put to the most strenuous test – due to the reasons relating to the different approach to teaching, the classroom's dynamic, the lessons, to which various types of uncertainties added – regarding their final grade (to the ones that this mark was relevant for their high school's or university's entry), regarding their final exams – online or not, what part of the curriculum was included, regarding the university's application process (for both the students that applied for national or international universities), regarding the way in which the university's first term will be carried out (the necessity of finding accommodation or not, how will they travel to the location in which the courses will be carried out, how will they travel then), regarding their graduation ceremony. Until answering all these uncertainties, the main issue was the adaptation to online teaching and all its modification regarding their digital wellbeing and its two main dimensions – rehearsing each individual's digital abilities and the relationship within the new digital medium so that it will provide comfort, safety, and satisfaction regarding the relationship (Rad & Demeter, 2019).

The people that had difficulties throughout this period opted for therapy to receive assistance in overcoming the encountered difficulties, to find support and understanding, to activate the necessary resources for the effort of integrating in the new means of functioning as a classroom, and also to enhance performance, finding solutions for the occurred problems, to understand their own acts, their own steps towards achieving a goal, to discover new adaptive strategies (Mumford, 2007). Therapy is like a „supportive mirror" because it functions through finding our own possibilities to hold up. It is a process which is realized by being questioned and choosing on your own, not through being told what to do. It is transparent, it encourages the subjects' change through self-exploration, self-discovery, self-determination, and it reaches to each one's creativity, to curiosity and the desire of being surprised by findings related to their own

person. So the success is guaranteed not by what the person says he or she will do, but by what they are effectively doing as a person (McDermott & Jago, 2006).

Wellbeing has three important components: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2017). In order to achieve wellbeing in this new and difficult context, all three components underwent changes for all of us, implicitly students. Autonomy relates to action according to our own values and goals. Throughout the lockdown, the students' main goals received new definitions, while some of them lost their sense and others were never able to be achieved. The students' competence was put to the test as well because the medium in which the activities were undergone changed, so the digital abilities received new and more important role. This also led to having access to the main reality of the Romanian teaching system i.e. the teachers are far less digitally able compared to their students. Regarding relatedness, in which the classroom's dynamic was faulty, the difficulty regarding the courses' attendance in the online environment was evident because the students did not have a connection to each other and they did not have a sense of inclusion within the group. The participatory behavior's stimulation takes place especially in common projects of each classroom's various groups of students, and unfortunately this is not a frequent reality within the Romanian educational system's classrooms. To partake in online schooling was not defined in terms of finding sense and happiness from the beginning and so the vigilance towards the online medium was constantly present. The students did not find something pleasant and motivational that would keep them engaged with the activities and they did not feel as if they were part of the classroom or group and that the relationship's dynamic was beneficial (Rad et al., 2020).

The perspective regarding the multiple changes, the burden brought by the lockdown, the dysfunctionalities the occurred due to the abrupt change of the medium in which the learning activities were undergone, proposes an excursion within some of the dimensions which were looked upon throughout therapy, to dismiss these dysfunctions for the students as follows: to promote health and wellbeing, to manage stress, to activate personal resources, to optimize the participatory behavior, to dismiss the negative emotional states.

## 2. Materials and methods

### 2.1. Objective and Hypothesis

The study's objectives overlook: the relationship between the student's participatory behavior and his or her adaptability to online schooling, as well as highlighting the improvement of the relationship's dynamic and the participation to the online activities after therapy.

### 2.2. Participants

In order to test these hypothesis, the subjects' group consisted in 14 people who opted for therapy during this period.

### 2.3. Instruments

In order to collect data, they were given two questionnaires: one which identifies the participatory behavior's dimensions and another one which highlights the perceived relationship's dynamic and their participation to the classes post-therapy. The questionnaire which overlooked the participatory behavior had the following dimensions – behavior relating to exchange (if they exchange classes, notes, the materials used for learning, information regarding the source of the materials used to for the learning process), the participatory behavior towards a group (do they contribute to the online classes, do they ask questions, do they participate in the activities), the attitude towards teamwork within the new conditions in which the classes are undergone.

### 2.4. Study Design and Procedure

In the beginning it was studied if there are any people advocating the participatory behavior among the subjects or not and in what way were they advocating for it. For the people that opted for therapy because of the online schooling difficulties, the premise was that participatory behavior was advantageous to undergo educational activities (even if they were face-to-face or online activities).

## 3. Results and discussion

After submitting the questionnaires, the results were as follows: 75% of the subjects did not consider participatory behavior important, 83% of the subjects did not consider the behavior of exchange valuable and relevant, all the subjects considered that participating in group activities was not relevant for them and regarding their attitude towards teamwork, none of

them were orientated to work in a team. After receiving these results, the therapeutic objectives were set. These subjects' results are pointing out to an issue of the Romanian educational space i.e. collaboration in classroom. Within the Romanian educational system, the students' work is usually focused on individual work, being scarcely stimulated towards teamwork. This results in students not being keen on valorizing teamwork because they lack the exercise relating to this work, so they undervalue its benefits.

The difficulties that the students have identified while working online for their classes are: access to the device needed (there weren't always enough devices for all the users in the house), not all had high-performance devices (not enough for every member of the household that worked online at once), the impossibility of being on their own in the room during class (for those who shared the room with a brother or sister), the absence of teachers or classes held in shorter amounts of time than it was schedules, lack of attention during class, the lack of appropriate instruments for teaching (blackboard for the teacher to write on, as an example), accessibility to online platforms, lack of attention while using the platforms during class. Due to the difficulties identified and the sudden changes that appeared once the emergency state was installed, all subjects have perceived relating to the class as something difficult.

Starting from the findings related to the participative behavior, but also from the difficulties the students have met in working online we have formulated the therapeutic objectives. These have targeted:

- Activating personal resources
- Decisional flexibility and the adaptability to multiple changes
- Valuing different dimensions of relating as follows: relating to the class in general within the relationship with teachers, relating to colleagues, the perception of the process of learning
- Optimizing the communication between colleagues and teachers with a role in adapting to school in the online environment, but also to the amelioration of school performance
- The change of the personal map that was not functional, with one that was functional (making the change from frustration to engagement and resolution, from anxiety and insecurity to engagement and success)

One can notice a change following therapy on the dimensions evaluated as follows:

- 73% of the respondents consider the exchange behavior as valuable and relevant and thus they constantly take part in initiating or responding in a positive way to it, or to similar behaviors seen in classmates

- 64% of participants value participating in group activities and consider that these have contributed to the amelioration of personal scholastic performances, but also to an ameliorated relational dynamic in the class

- 57% of the participants consider that team work is important and emphasize its role in being part of school in the current conditions

In addition, all mention that the communication in class has improved, among themselves but also with the teachers, the relational dynamic between the classmates has been optimized and they have managed to surpass the difficulties of staying in from of their camera and concentrate throughout the lesson.

In the online space the social construct of our reality was created differently as in the online sphere, exercising the power of the public space has a different valence. We are co-creators of the social reality through our communication and through the dynamics of our relationship (Sandu, 2016). The new environment in which relating and communicating has happened is one in which the power rapports have changed, with our capacity to adapt and the wish to move forward coming out to the surface. One of our relational dimensions activates in the online activities, and that is our social anxiety to evaluation.  This is a component of social anxiety, characterized by a strong fear of being negatively evaluated by the others (Calsyn et al., 2005). Due to the fact that we are alone in front of a screen we perceive ourselves differently, but especially exposed and vulnerable to evaluation (more vulnerable). For children the pressure is even higher as during this time they perceive the relationships with others, suddenly different than until now. For certain students, relating with classmates happened only in class and in public places, and suddenly, with all the changes brought by the pandemic, they were forced to receive them all „at home" through a screen.  All these changes in which certain aspects of their lives have been made public has brought along discomfort (from the way their room looks like, to the way they are dressed, who else is in the same room with them, etc.) and have represented an extra stressor during this time, so that each student's level of stress augmented. Each student had to make numerous adjustments during this time, which enhanced the discomfort in front of the camera, the person's fitting to the environment was different by comparison to their class work, and the work conditions were entirely new, on top of school work all the home activities from the other family members were superimposed.

We have all gone through this period through changes in all of our life's plans – from working from the office, to working from home, from going out when and where we want to only going out in certain places and

certain moments, etc. Over all the fear of an unknown disease also superimposed. For adults it was difficult, but each knew relatively well their own personal resources, but for the children it was different and far more difficult for the element of novelty, for the multitude of restrictions that they hardly understood. Pupils needed extra support to surpass this period that was so different than until now, but an extra issue was finishing the school year well in the new conditions (going from face-to-face learning to learning online). In front of a screen, our possibilities to react, even if immediate are less accessed as we and the others, in a different networking and far more exposed (me alone on one side and all the others on the other side). Students with a high level of social anxiety for evaluation have gone through this with significant difficulty (Malin, 2003). During this entire period, therapy proved to be a real tangible support for adapting to the new conditions and to enhance each person's comfort with the new life defined by the pandemic. In therapy, for children and not only the moment they identify the change, and what has brought a personal growth from there onwards (Slayton et al., 2010) This will bring constant growth, the ability to solution the dysfunctionalities that may appear, improving their quality of life on all plans, carrying through online learning activities easily and this will make their perception on digital wellbeing better.

## 4. Discussions and conclusion

This pandemic period has been, for all of us, one of multiple tries and one of the biggest for the school system was moving from face-to-face teaching to online teaching. The difficulties appeared both in the activity in itself done by the teachers, but also in the pupils' activity. The study brings to light some data from this period, data referring to the pupils' activity and the perception they had on it, but also data on the support that therapy has brought for adapting to the new conditions and the creation of a healthy environment to unfold activity. The challenge for the work with pupils online is difficult in itself, and thus the challenge to find new solutions in new and relatively limited context to tackle issues proved even more difficult. In this space of working with others it is always needed, as a therapist to take their wishes and their ability to move forward with their life into account (Sandu & Frunză, 2019). In this completely new state for all of us, that of the state of emergency, we have managed to attach, through the therapeutic endeavor the students in an authentic partnership, centered on their news that they themselves identified. In therapy, through the main benefits enumerated by clients are the ones about the change in their general wellbeing, both physically and mentally, a decrease in stressors, the possibilities for personal

growth (Leckley, 2011). The main benefits identified by the students themselves, were the ones tied to getting over the discomfort of learning online to the wellbeing given by the activities with their classmates while online. The existence of such an endeavor creates a working space that facilitates the access to the student's wellbeing, his or her adaptability, creating premises for an online learning process that is made more efficient, to discovering new ways of working online, that were different until that moment, to understanding the role each student has in rectifying the issues that intervened, but also who to go to for support during this time.

Anxiety and apathy, as well as isolation, are two of the symptoms of mental well-being that may persist long beyond the completion of the pandemic, while the heightened feelings of distress and tension, particularly at an unpredictable period, may have major consequences for public wellbeing, can increase vulnerability to poor health, and can threaten the whole of society. While some specific circumstances require social distance, social isolation should not become a norm. Such two terms are often used interchangeably, but the definitions of both words can be specifically differentiated and used accordingly.

In current times where social distancing and isolation represent important aspects of daily life, public bodies have to mobilize their ability to respond to individuals' emerging necessities and tackle the overall wellbeing effects of social isolation. It is important for humanity to counter the pandemic and keep it from spreading further, but these interventions do not mean that social interaction will collapse. The effect of isolation and loneliness should never be underestimated, as failure to act will lead to increased human and financial costs later on. Strong social and economic arguments should suffice to convince decision-makers that urgent action is also needed to address the social isolation of people, especially those in a vulnerable position. Developing appropriate strategies, including preventive initiatives, is not an simple task during a public health emergency, where goals need to be redefined and public funding desperately needs to be reallocated; but awareness of these concerns will now make a substantial contribution to reducing the long-term impact of the ongoing crisis.

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