Original Research   **Open Access**

Emergency Remote Education (ERE) Due to COVID-19 Pandemic: Teachers' Perceptions on the Roles They Were Asked To Play

Marina Kougiourouki (Corresponding Author)
Department of Primary Education, Democritus University of Thrace, Alexandroupolis, Greece
Email: mkougiou@eled.duth.gr

Zinovia Masali
Department of Primary Education, Democritus University of Thrace, Alexandroupolis, Greece

Abstract

The suspension of the educational process imposed in all educational levels in many countries due to the rapid spread of the Covid-19 pandemic, together with the need for access to safe teaching, imposed an emergency and massive turn towards online education. This new condition came as a surprise to teachers, who were obliged to use new technologies for the design and the implementation of their teaching, as well as for the communication with and support to their students, changing thus not only the manner of teaching and learning but also the roles they were asked to respond to. The present paper, using semi-structured interview as a tool, studies the views of ten Greek teachers of primary education regarding their role in remote education in the emergency caused by this pandemic, the skills that helped them respond to these roles, the obstacles but also the assistance they encountered in their efforts. The research findings demonstrate that the teachers, with their patience and their persistence, utilized the limited knowledge they had and the ex post facto-acquired training they received, and - in cooperation with students, parents, but, above all, colleagues – made an effort to respond to the various roles they were asked to play.

Keywords: Emergency remote education (ERE); Covid-19; Pandemic; Teaching; Instructional design; In-service teacher education.

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 emergence, together with its rapid spread all over the world has led to the suspension of the face to face operation (F2F) of educational institutions in all levels of education in many countries (OECD, 2020; UNESCO, 2021). The need that directly emerged was to continue education unimpeded and to create conditions of access to safe teaching, a need that could be covered through online education, *"a digital teaching system that involves learners and teachers separated from each other by physical distance"* (Zilka, 2021). This was a temporary turn of education - caused by the particularly crucial conditions created by the COVID-19 pandemic - towards an education provided totally by distance, in a fast and accessible manner (Hodges, Moore, Lockee, Trust and Bond, 2020), organizer of which being the teacher (Toporski and Foley, 2004), and for which *"a proper term has appeared in the academic domain: emergency remote education"* (Wu, 2021).

The educational system of countries like Estonia, Sweden, Canada and Denmark was at a high level of readiness, due to the fact that their educational systems possessed the necessary infrastructure (hardware, internet connection, online learning platforms) to respond to distance learning, while Greece to a great extent fell short in this field (Schiller *et al.*, 2021). However, it reacted swiftly and methodically by promptly providing to the educational community free access to internet platforms and tools, in order for education to continue in online mode in all educational levels (Toledo Figueroa and Rawkins, 2020). During the first compulsory transition to online mode, which lasted from March to May 2020, teachers were obliged to use one of the two digital platforms of asynchronous remote education, eclass and e-me. During this period, the utilization of the Cisco Webex Meetings platform of synchronous remote education was optional (Ministry of Education, 2020)[1]. In the coming school year, during the period when all school units remained closed (November 2020-April 2021), all teachers combined synchronous and asynchronous distance learning aiming not to disrupt the educational process.

Teachers, students and parents were confronted with a big challenge. Most teachers had neither the knowledge nor any previous experience (Wu, 2021) – especially in Greece (Albiser *et al.*, 2020), however their response to this new and unprecedented emergency situation was impressive, as it can be discerned from the number of teachers that created their own virtual class as well as from the students that attended synchronous remote education (Papazoglou

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[1] In order to cover the gap created in participation of students in remote education due to lack of sufficient infrastructure, what was important was the contribution of other remote learning channels such as educational tv programs (Schleicher, 2020).

and Koutouzis, 2020). This turn to online education motivated teachers by offering them the possibility to activate alternative and more versatile forms of teaching, however forcing them to implement this at a very fast pace (Donham *et al.*, 2022; Hodges *et al.*, 2020; Phillips *et al.*, 2021), which caused them to face an enormous amount of additional work and to stress (Jurs and Kulberga, 2021; Oliveira *et al.*, 2021; Raikou *et al.*, 2021) and generally to experience negative emotions (Mikošková and Verešová, 2020).

Thus, while the pandemic breakout found Greece in a dire position, compared to other countries, regarding matters related to the educational system preparedness to respond to this new condition and to the availability of effective online platforms, the education policy response was impressive (Schiller *et al.*, 2021). This was rendered possible thanks to *"the flexibility, the adaptability, the resilience and the determination of the system, the schools, the teachers and the students"* (Meinck *et al.*, 2022). Especially the teachers updated and enriched knowledge and skills regarding new technologies (ITC) (Stachteas and Stachteas, 2020) via the Free Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC), designed and developed by the Hellenic Open University and the Greek Institute of Educational Policy during the lockdown (Lionarakis *et al.*, 2020), and three MOOC seminars, implemented by the Greek eTwinning community in order to *"assist teachers in the use and pedagogical utilization of distance education tools"* (Toledo Figueroa and Rawkins, 2020; Tzimopoulos *et al.*, 2021), and via obligatory every day involvement in remote education, they gradually gained self-confidence in use of new technologies for designing and implementing teaching sessions, but also in communicating with and supporting their students (Beardsley *et al.*, 2021).

Distancing students and teachers from the classroom and use of technology, not only changed the way of teaching and learning, but also created new roles, which the teacher was asked to respond to Isman *et al.* (2004); Vogiatzaki (2019); Kim and Asbury (2020); Schleicher (2020); Truzoli *et al.* (2020); Temelli *et al.* (2021). This present paper will attempt to research into the views of Greek teachers of primary education regarding their roles during remote education in the period of COVID-19 pandemic.

There is a feeling that remote education "is here to stay". If this perception is true, then the findings that emerge from this small-scale research should sensitize those in charge of educational policies, so that they aid teachers, with prompt and coordinated actions, in their effort to effectively respond to their new roles.

2. Method

Aim of this research is to record the views of primary education teachers on the roles they were asked to undertake in the framework of remote education (synchronous and asynchronous), within this special emergency situation caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, on the ways and strategies by which they tried to respond, on the skills required for these roles as well as on the agents (school unit headmaster, training institutions etc) that potentially supported their efforts.

To collect the material under scrutiny, the semi-structured interview was selected as a tool (Adams, 2010; Wilson, 2014), as it offers the possibility to add or remove questions to an already existing number of predetermined questions, change their order, or even pose clarifying questions to the research participants. This way, the participants have the opportunity to express their views freely (Verma and Mallick, 1999).

2.1. Participants

Convenience and snowball sampling was used by the researchers in order to recruit teachers to complete the survey. The current study included 10 primary school teachers from Alexandroupolis (a small town in north-east Greece). Most of them were women. Teaching experience ranged from 16 to 36 years of teaching, with three teachers having more than 25 years of experience, four between 21 and 25 years, and three having 20 or fewer years. Two of them held a second bachelor degree and five of them a master's degree. All of them have attended a multitude of trainings from various institutions.

The teachers who serve in primary schools (apart from those teaching special subjects such as e.g. PE, music, ICT) are graduates of the Pedagogical Department of Primary Education. Their salaries do not differ significantly, as they consist of the basic salary and the bonuses related to years of service, holding a post-graduate degree and family status. Concerning the working hours during remote education, they had 17-18 teaching hours (30´ in duration) as compulsory teaching work per week. All the teachers that participated in our research were parents, while two of the eight women, were divorced.

2.2. Data Collection

The collection of research data took place in December 2021. Each participant had the option to decide whether they would participate in the research or not. Each interview lasted 30 minutes on average.

The questions posed were six (6) and all of them open-ended, so that participants could respond in a pleasant atmosphere between interviewer and interviewee. The research material consisted of ten transcribed interviews of primary education teachers of Alexandroupolis.

To process and analyze the research material, the method of qualitative content analysis was used (Gall *et al.*, 1996; Stemler, 2000; White and March, 2006), a research technique which historically was defined as a systematic technique *"for the objective, systematic and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication"*(Berelson, 1952), that *"provides new insights, increases a researcher's understanding of particular phenomena, or informs practical actions"* (Krippendorf, 2004).

In this particular research the following steps were taken: the material to be processed was defined as well as the aims sought to be achieved by it, the units of analysis were specified (Elo and Kyngäs, 2007) and the system of

sub(categories) that was subsequently checked based on the research questions was assembled.

3. Interview Material Analysis

The testimonies of the teachers who participated in the research showcase the successful effectuation of distance learning - synchronous and asynchronous - on their behalf. More analytically, with regard to the **roles** the teachers were asked to support in this framework of distance learning (synchronous and asynchronous), during the Covid-19 pandemic, the replies demonstrate more than one. Teachers' statements focus on the role of teacher, encourager, psychologist on the one hand, but also ICT expert as well as technician expected to solve various matters regarding new technologies. More specifically, it is stated:

> *"... of the teacher who continues with the curriculum, the psychologist who is by the side of the child, the social worker who is standing by the children and listens to their problems, the technician who attempts to solve problems that don't' belong to our science but to ICT"* (A6).

With regard to the role of *teacher*, the organizer of teaching and learning, the teachers participating in our research refer to their everyday preparation for class implementation. One teacher states:

> *"As a teacher I had to search the previous day online for whatever I had to project in order to show to my class students, whatever was relevant to the lesson I had to search to find it. I was a teacher who organizes his own teaching"* (A8).

Almost all teachers claim that, besides the teacher-organizer of the learning process, one more role which they had to respond to during distance learning, was that of *encourager* and *psychologist*, in order to help students feel comfortable and overcome potential fears or the stress caused by this unprecedented situation. Related to that, they report:

> *"My role was mainly encouraging and a lot of psychological support to the children..."* (A10),
> *"Apart from our educational work as teachers, we were also psychologists to the children because children felt extremely bad and were basically scared when schools closed... this confinement affected them very badly and in the beginning, I must confess, the first sessions were discussions on how to have a good time throughout all this. The children longed to meet. That is, we had the role of teacher and psychologist, in a few words"* (A7),
> *"I wanted... to speak also about how they feel, why they were confined, why they didn't go to school. And to let out what they feel inside them as much as possible... I was something like a psychologist..."* (A6).

Teachers also describe themselves as a person who had to stand by each student in empathy and support of their effort:

> *"Our role was at this point supportive, in the sense that we are close to the children, we try to maintain contact with the educational process, parallel to that to make them feel good in this remote condition that existed"* (A3),
> *"Because mostly we had to do with support towards the students than with lessons. Teacher-supporter..."* (A4).

Simultaneously, however, and according to what they say, they had to respond to the role of *ICT expert*, who also contributes as a technician in matters of informatics and new technologies. Related to that, they claim:

> *"There had to be, therefore, technological support, me playing the role of expert in new technologies and informatics. I had to be expert also in matters of computers and in procedures"* (A1).

As ICT experts, some teachers assisted not only students but also parents and colleagues that fell short in knowledge in the field of ICT. Related to that it is reported:

> *"First of all, I was asked to play the role of ICT teacher. Related to parents but also related to other teachers as well"* (A5).

For teachers to be able to respond, to a certain extent, to the role of ICT expert – among others – they needed to be well-acquainted with the subject at hand. They state relevant to this:

> *"Also, because to a great extent I was knowledgeable in computers, I solved several problems related to computers or internet. Not all the problems, but several. This was entirely the technical part that is handled by an ICT teacher"* (A6).

The truth is, however, that not all teachers were well-acquainted with this subject, thus, in order for them to cope, it was required that they got informed, they researched on their own, they read and they practiced. In other words, they had to become *students* themselves first, and, as a teacher reports:

> *"I had to be very well-acquainted with ICT media, computers etc, of one program, that is two programs. We were made to learn it by ourselves, by experience and out will to get involved. That is, in essence, we had to become students first, to learn it, to see how it works and then apply it in education"* (A2).

Finally, two distinct roles emerged from the research participants' words and these were the role of *referee* and the role of *clown*. It is worth-noting that both of these roles were reported by two female teachers. One teacher narrates that she even had to play the role of referee and, as the referee resolves conflicts and regulates the course of a game or a race, she was asked to regulate a procedure among participants:

> *"also the referee, because class ages were small and the parents were close by during the process. The parents interfered in the process, either because some children were noisy, either*

to help their own children, either to say that they were tired and that we should take a break"
(A5).

Another teacher reports that she had to play the role of clown, a role – however – that even in class she sometimes needs to play:

"I became and I become a clown in class so that we relax but I was a different clown during the in-person class and different in the online, the cold and inhumane" (A8).

The teachers who participated in our research discerned that in their effort to **live up to these diverse roles, what contributed positively** was their *knowledge* and their *character*, their relationship with the students, the good *cooperation with students, parents and colleagues.*

Specifically, half of the participants in our research believe that possessing specialized knowledge helped them respond to the role of ICT expert, but also to that of organizer of a remote session. This knowledge, as they claim, concerns the use of programs and applications but also the organizing of a distance session, and for some of them it (the knowledge) pre-existed:

"I know many internet tools which have helped me very much to support remote education (synchronous and asynchronous) (A3),
"My knowledge with computer helped me very much to cope with all this" (A6).

However, some others had certain basic knowledge regarding computers and specific applications, and through study and practice managed to improve also in the use of remote education tools:

"I was in a medium to good condition related to computer knowledge. And this, after a lot of studying. It was a positive fact that I knew how to operate a computer and certain programs and applications" (A5),
"I had the time to study it and familiarize myself with the process. So, I learned the first practical stuff regarding the use of tools that WebEx had…" (A4).

Two of the teachers that participated in our research claim that, in their effort to respond to their roles, what counted positively was their familiarization with online education through their participation in Postgraduate Studies that are effected in this fashion:

"... because I have familiarized myself through the postgraduate course that I participated, which was online…" (A9).

What gave them substantial momentum to respond to their difficult feat that comprised many and diverse roles was their *character* and their *love for their students*. Thus, two of the teachers, referring to elements of their character, claim that:

"...it was a matter of conscientiousness on my part" (A4),
"... we wanted to live up to our role, to do it as correctly as possible and the sense of responsibility I have as a person in wanting to do my job properly" (A2).

Concerning their *love for their students* and its contribution, two of the teachers explain:

"I was very motivated by the fact that this was the only communication that the children could have. That's why I struggled a lot to see how I could do this best. It was the only thing they would have left. It would bring them out of this sudden confinement in the house… Also, it is a matter of love towards my students" (A4),
"it was the love we have towards our students. It all starts from there" (A2).

The factor *"students"* is important, as a male teacher claims, for one additional reason. This reason is related to the way in which they responded to remote education and the effort that their teacher made. The students' positive attitude has been for some teachers substantial boost in order for them to live up to their roles:

"besides, the children also helped because they participated, because they showed interest"
(A2).

Last but not least comes the reference, by two teachers, both of whom were women, to the factor *"cooperation"* and to how much this has influenced the way they responded to their roles. This cooperation is related as much with colleagues (i.e. teachers within the school) as with students' parents:

"both discussions with colleagues and discussions with parents e.g. for every child, how I can have it closer to me, in this sense they were positive factors in my effort to respond to my roles"
(A8),
"there was a lot of support from the family environment of the children. They were very reassuring towards their children and towards me" (A10).

However, because every coin has its flipside, the teachers who participated in our research reported that **in their effort to live up to these diverse roles they also encountered obstacles.** These were basically related to *infrastructure, ignorance of how to operate a pc, the platform and how to organize a remote session, the stress* that overtook teachers as well as *the time for teaching sessions.*

All teachers made an extensive reference to the difficulties they encountered that involved computers and internet connection. In the framework of implementation of remote education, teachers were given the option either to use the school spaces, the machines that existed in it and its internet connection, or stay at home and use their own personal equipment.

In both cases, teachers had to deal with substantial difficulties. Thus, a teacher that decided to go to the school and implement remote education from there states that:

"... in reality there were connection problems there as well. These problems concerned as much the machines as the internet connection, which wouldn't "hold" so many connections, because there were other teachers there as well" (A5).

Two other teachers that chose their home space and their own personal equipment also faced problems due to the existence of other family members in the house (children, husband) that also were involved in remote education:

"the impediments of the system itself that were very difficult because at home there are two (2) more children, which also attended remote education online and occupied the network and it wasn't easy at all to carry out my work" (A8).

At other times, problems were created due to the incapacity of the "platform" to serve so many users. This greatly delayed the effectuation of all the teachers' actions which resulted in its "gnawing away" precious time from their work but also from their life in general:

"We dedicated many hours, the system wouldn't speed because there were many thousands of participants online simultaneously, therefore the system collapsed. We waited for days to be able to "upload" a leaflet…" (A2),

"There was suddenly a huge number of students and teachers that had to communicate through these platforms. Therefore, it was mostly a technical matter, these were the biggest difficulties" (A3).

One of the teachers who participated in our research reported as an inhibiting factor in his effort to live up to the roles he was asked to play in distance learning *the insufficient knowledge – on his side – of computer operation*, of the platform provided by the state and well as of the organization of a remote teaching session:

"Negatively for sure because we didn't know from the beginning how all systems function, these platforms. In the beginning it was very difficult" (A2).

A reference is made by one teacher to stress, as a factor that negatively affected her being effective in her roles. Stress, which can sometimes be creative, in her case had a negative impact:

"One negative factor was mainly my stress. I had an awful lot of stress in this process. It wasn't creative stress because I was trying to stand on my feet, to get to know the process, I was afraid I might make a mistake, that perhaps I am not doing something right, that the system might not 'open', perhaps the internet" (A9).

Finally, three teachers report that the early afternoon hours, the time when remote education took place for primary school students, were one of the factors that had a negative impact on their effort to respond to their roles in remote education, and justify this accordingly:

"... what was negative was the time that remote learning took place for primary students, which was very difficult. It was an afternoon hour when children want to relax, to play, to watch TV. These hours were very difficult for everyone, because others were hungry, others wanted to play…" (A9),

"I sometimes felt that children were bored, perhaps because the lesson took place in early afternoon" (A6).

In order to live up to the roles they were asked to play in remote education, the participants in our research report that they were aided by skills such as *good organization, meticulousness, composure* and *flexibility, their sense of humor*.

One teacher considers that the fact that she is well-organized and systematic has helped her respond to this unprecedented challenge of remote education: *"I am, also very well-organized and methodical"* (A6), while another reports that what was of substantial importance was: *"the consistency we, all teachers of Greece, proved that we possess"* (A7). One teacher considers flexibility to be an important asset as:

"…during online education you must apply many things and somewhat different each time because a child is bored by one monotonous style… when you always have one monotonous style, the child is bored. So, we need to be flexible. To invent many things" (A6).

Flexibility, moreover, offers the teacher the possibility to re-adjust his/her teaching in case he/she realizes that this (the teaching) is not effective to the students. In order, however, for such an action to take place on behalf of the teacher, composure is essential, and two of the teachers who participated in our research consider that it was this skill that helped them respond to their roles, as it did not allow panic to overcome them and "destroy their teaching":

"I also consider that I possessed a great deal of composure and I was not overcome by panic when something did not go well" (A5),

"I also don't let panic overcome me. I have now learnt to be more composed and to face with composure the possible negative turns and to manage my stress. If I couldn't manage it, how would we be able to come through this difficult condition" (A6).

Finally, two teachers consider that what helped them most in remote learning and in the relationship they developed with their students was their communication skills and their sense of humor, which (humor), even though they use successfully in a real classroom, is very difficult to apply in remote education. It is worth-mentioning that both of them were female.

"my communication skills" (A9),

"I use humor a lot. I make jokes with the children and children perceive this and they laugh. That is, they are having a pleasant time with me…. I can manage humor properly inside the classroom. I am a little bit of an actress in class. To approach children, I put on acts. Because I

see that I attract their attention this way. Now, I did this as much as I could through WebEx,
also, which was not easily done" (A6).

The lack of the above-mentioned skills definitely rendered teachers vulnerable during remote learning and this had an impact on the effectiveness of their teaching.

"How does a teacher feel, however, when they put effort and consume time but, due to lack of proper training does not have the result that they expect?". To this question one teacher replies that someone might feel *frustration*. It is noteworthy that the comment was made by a male teacher, with post-graduate studies, having the most years of service and being the oldest in age.

"It might make him/her feel frustrated because they cannot do what they want, to do it in the
time they want it because they have a family and whatever else they have and there is this fear.
That I consume so much time and in the end I do nothing. 'Like beating the air'" (A1).

Another teacher replies that someone may feel confused and awkward, especially when they cannot maintain their self-control:

"... I saw a colleague who didn't have skills and he was at a loss. He had neither the knowledge
nor the composure. In a negative turn of the system, he didn't know what to do" (A5).

Finally, one teacher shares her personal experience by speaking about her inability to live up to remote teaching. This particular teacher is one of the two people having the least years of service and being the youngest in age.

"I have said a million apologies to the children, I have cried, I have been psychologically
burdened…" (A8).

Teachers, thus, have felt especially vulnerable during remote education, especially in the beginning. **Who stood by their side assisting them in their effort?** The official State? The school administration? Or perhaps it was the solidarity among them that aided their efforts?

Seven of the teachers who participated in our research claim that the official State did not help them. Three of them consider that it did not help them: *"... at all. In any sector, I could say"* (A6) and *"... it threw us into the ocean and ... here you are… swim"* (A2). Three teachers consider that the State tried to stand by the teachers but, according to one teacher this effort was: *"Insufficient! It was there but not adequately. Only slightly…"* (A5), while, according to two others this happened in the beginning. Subsequently the situation changed and the official State attempted and succeeded in aiding teachers:

"the official state was not by our side… of course not … No, it wasn't, initially, not" (A7),
"The first year, not. The second year, however, the situation smoothened. The first year, because
it happened very fast and because I think that for them also it was something new, NO, we didn't
have everything we should have had. The second year, though, we did" (A9).

Teachers believe that there were needs with which the official state could have helped teachers, but, unfortunately, this did not happen. Specifically, their reports focus on *infrastructure*, *internet connection*, *learning material databases* and *training*. Half of the teachers who participated in our research report as their basic need - in order to implement online teaching - the equipment, a need in which they were not supported by the official State, as, two of them claim, they used their personal equipment:

"I don't think it supported us. Not by means. We all fought with our own means. We bought our
own equipment" (A10),
"Because for what reason should I be using my own equipment for something that was the
Ministry's, the school's, the civil sector's?" (A3).

Of course, as it was mentioned before, there was the option either to go to school and implement remote education from there, or even to procure equipment from the school. However, conditions at school were problematic:

"In a cold school?! In a school where covid restrictions apply?" (A3),
"... the school was open and I could go and teach from there, but it was winter and there was no
heating in the building and I would have to teach my subject inside a cold classroom" (A6),
"The conditions at school were not ideal. The staff room for teachers who had chosen to teach
from the school was heated with an air heater. The radiators (the central heating) weren't on"
(A1).

Moreover, the equipment that the school possessed was old and problematic:

"Schools have outdated equipment so we had to rely on what we have ourselves" (A10),
"As a teacher I had a very hard time ... I had neither the proper computer and even the one I
took from the school did not function as well as it should" (A4).

Two of the teachers add that, in order to upgrade the home internet connection that they used for remote education, they had to spend additional money:

"I was personally forced to get an upgraded internet line. Nobody supported us in this" (A3),
"I was forced to pay extra money to upgrade my internet connection" (A4).

Two of the teachers who participated in our research recognize that there was support from the official State towards the teachers and this was in the form of providing e-me, eClass and WebEx, so that they can organize and effectuate their work. These are the basic tools of remote education for which the official State took immediate care and offered to teachers of all levels of education. They state related to that:

"The only tool that was given to us were the platforms e-me, eClass and WebEx … But apart
from that, a WebEx platform and an e-me platform does not mean that suddenly everything is
resolved" (A3),

"For me personally, as far as the platform is concerned, the existence of the platform" (A9).

Concerning the support of teachers on behalf of the State so that they respond to the needs of remote education, there was special mention from the teachers to the training that they were provided and which they so much needed. The teachers' participation in the intensive teacher training for remote education (T4E) – whose aim was to cultivate in all teachers knowledge and skills related to online education with teaching approaches and methodological tools – is not to be taken for granted with regard to all teachers who participated in our research. Two of them were not able to participate. The eight that participated said that this training was delayed in its implementation:

"It was 'a day late and a dollar short' of course. I would prefer for all this to have happened sooner. When we were struggling to learn the eClass or the eMe platform, to see how these work and how we can do various activities. They told us all this, of course, but after one year. I wanted it much sooner" (A2),

"But this happened late and we had already resolved by ourselves some problems that we faced. Several months passed before this training took place" (A6).

For this reason, all eight teachers who participated in our research consider that they were not particularly helped by the implementation of this training, while one of them considered it a "waste of time". The report about that:

"as it happened afterwards it didn't help me with anything. If I had received it earlier of course things would have been better" (A1),

"... it was a waste of time, because I heard things that I already know and have heard many times…" (A3).

Despite the negative impressions that the eight teachers expressed due to the delayed training they received on remote education, there were some few positive points that they underline and these are related to information they had on the digital educational platform e-me and specifically on some of its tools, as well as issues of design of an online session that they were offered in the training program T4E. They remark related to that:

"It was my acquaintance with e-me, with which I was never involved and it was an opportunity to get to know it" (A1),

"We learnt a lot of things that we applied with my students ... such as e.g. dividing in teams, the questionnaire, some quizzes we made on our own" (A7),

"However, it offered because they showed us extra things ... they showed us to the maximum all the potential that this program has and we can use it. That is, in the second phase of remote education we used many more things that this program possesses such as e.g. how to do a poll, poll-like questions so that students participate, that is more potential" (A2),

"They showed us ways of designing a session for remote education…" (A2).

Apart from the State, however, the teachers expected support from the school administration, in order to respond to their work. Concerning the school administration: *"... it was by our side in matters administrative, organizational…."* (A5) and ensured that the school is *"open in the morning hours when personnel had to be there. So the administration was there in the mornings"* (A1), in order to execute all administrative affairs and the necessary procedures for the implementation of remote education: *"Organizationally-wise, however, the administration had taken care of the students, had made sure they sent the emails for managing my class and I only logged in and did the teaching"* (A4).

Moreover, the administration took into consideration the *equipping of* teachers with apparatus that the school possessed or even procure new equipment for the school:

"There was support. Immediately they gave us whatever equipment we needed from the school. Whatever we needed at whatever moment, there was a door open that always helped" (A10),

"It (the administration) helped us a lot ... the headmaster tried to respond - to the degree that he could - to the needs, either by buying essential equipment for whomever didn't have e.g. cameras, microphones, either by buying extra computers, either by borrowing computers from the lab, so that they (teachers) are accommodated. Also, it contributed by equipping classrooms because we had the option to go to the school to teach our lesson, as all classrooms there are equipped" (A9).

One additional field in which school administration provided support to teachers during remote education was the dissemination of every bit of important information so much towards the teachers as towards the students' parents:

"It helped me only in matters related to informing the parents. The contribution and the help of the headmaster was when I asked to be informed first so that I inform in my turn the parents on certain current affairs" (A6),

"... Also communication with parents took place. Parents would come to take books, to get new issues, to take certificates that they needed to be able to move" (A1).

This act on their behalf, helped teachers to implement their work unobstructed, as the administration would solve even the potential problems that parents faced regarding their children's connection to the virtual classroom or potential complaints the parents might have:

"The school administration was by our side ... also in the cooperation with parents and in handling them. Some parents that could not connect and faced some problems would call the school and the headmaster accommodated them…" (A5),

> *"... the school administration could, at any given moment, contact the parents and cover whatever complaint the parents might have. To function as a 'wave-breaker' and extinguish complaints or demands on behalf of parents, which were very often unrealistic because parents themselves didn't know and they asked for things, and they demanded and they complained about something they were not experts on. So, in this respect the school administration operated as a fire-extinguisher that made sure that demands and complaints don't reach us and keep us safe in order to do our work unobstructed"* (A3).

However, two teachers don't seem to agree with their colleagues and believe that the administration did not help them in general, but also specifically with issues they had with parents: *"The administration didn't help us with issues we had with parents. On the contrary there was judgment similar to that of the parents"* (A8).

Regarding the help that the teachers received from the remote education support team, teachers seem divided, as some report that they were helped:

> *"It helped us a lot ... The team was supportive too, and if we had an issue, they would resolve it for us"* (A9),
>
> *"Very much. We communicated on a daily basis. When we faced problems, we would always call the support team and they would help in whatever way they could, because for them also it was new and unprecedented"* (A7).

Some other teachers, however, do not agree and point out that the support team did not respond adequately to their work:

> *"There was a support team, you could address them if there was something extreme. But it happened that the aim through this support was not fulfilled"* (A5),
>
> *"There was a support team, however I feel that they should perform better"* (A3).

Five out of the ten teachers who participated in our research made special references to the ICT teacher of their school saying that:

> *"The ICT teacher was there for some colleagues who had difficulties mainly regarding the operation of the apparatus and the use of the platform but also made some interventions through viber where all teachers chatted together. The second year he mainly informed us on how to upload videos on youtube through safeyoutube so as not to have advertisements and all those that 'pop out' while you are watching something on youtube"* (A4).

Three of them report that, besides the fact that the ICT teacher was always close to the teachers of the school who were facing a problem, he organized, at the start of the remote education, in-service seminars so as to help his colleagues:

> *"With the means that they had at their disposal e.g. the ICT teacher did the presentation of the process and all that. He did some in-service online seminars to the teachers of our school and was by our side if someone faced technical problems. Also, he gave the material he had at the computer lab. Any teacher who didn't have equipment could obtain it from there. He also opened the lab at the school for certain hours, during the lockdown, and whoever among teachers needed to get something, they could. Consequently, there was support"* (A1),
>
> *"Yes, they helped us enough by providing us with as many means as they had at their disposal ... the ICT colleague did some trainings on her own so that we could understand how these platforms work, in the beginning. The colleague was supportive all the time ... The ICT teacher helped us a lot and she did so by herself"* (A2),
>
> *"Before we started, we had learnt new tools, as we did a very quick training at school by our ICT teacher"* (A9).

Some of the participants "raise contrary voices", presenting a different image of the ICT teacher, an image totally not positive for the whole process. One teacher justifies the lack of support on behalf of the ICT teacher saying that:

> *"... In our school the ICT colleague, because he had a class himself, could not respond and help me during my class, if I faced a problem"* (A8).

Two other teachers do not give any excuse to the lack of support on behalf of the ICT teacher stating that:

> *"That is, I believe that the ICT in our school did not respond to the role that an ICT of a school unit should play"* (A3),
>
> *"We were not helped by the ICT 'Misses' because she didn't know herself and she didn't want to ... She didn't know Webex. She didn't want to work on it, so to speak"* (A7).

At this point we should not omit to mention that the teachers bring forward solidarity and mutual support among them as of uttermost importance:

> *".. we, colleagues would solve queries among ourselves. And, specifically, not only the colleagues within the school but also colleagues of other schools, even outside the region ..."* (A8),
>
> *"So, by ourselves and without a computer expert we managed to come through with the head of the school and the vice-head and the wonderful colleagues that made efforts with whatever each of them knew. We called each other all day. Half the day was communication with colleagues about what to do and the other half classes with students"* (A7).

4. Discussion

As it arose from the interviews of ten elementary school teachers of one city in Greece in the COVID-19-induced pandemic period and specifically in the framework of remote education, teachers were asked to play the role of teacher, counsellor, communication-promoter etc (Giannouli *et al.*, 2021; Isman *et al.*, 2004; Vogiatzaki, 2019), roles that – in one way or another – they are also asked to play in physical classroom (Chatzidimou, 2015), but also certain other roles, such as the computer science expert as well as technical-matters-related-to new-technologies expert.

And, of course, every teacher may daily dedicate the time necessary to prepare and design the next day's session, however, for the organization of remote teaching sessions the teachers had to take into account certain extra factors, which are related to the virtual environment where this teaching would take place (e.g. constructing material and means that could be presented, conditions of work and of student cooperation that could be organized through this platform and the tools that it offers) (Oliveira *et al.*, 2021; Phillips *et al.*, 2021). Moreover, the psychological support and encouragement that they daily provide to their students in F2F (face to face) teaching now had an added charge, during the pandemic-induced social distancing (Mahmood, 2020), the conditions that all people and especially young students experienced were unprecedented and created stress and fear for the unknown (Lesser *et al.*, 2021; Osgood *et al.*, 2021; Spiteri, 2021). It was, therefore, about diverse roles, through which teachers were called to support not only their students but also their students' parents (Garbe *et al.*, 2020; Meinck *et al.*, 2022).

Valuable contributors to the teachers' effort to live up to the roles they were asked to play during remote education were the skills (Darling-Hammond and Hyler, 2020; Muñoz-Najar *et al.*, 2021) that they possessed, such as good organization, meticulousness, composure, flexibility and sense of humor as well as knowledge related to new technologies. However, the lack of knowledge and skills concerning preparation, designing and implementing an online session had – for some teachers (Ainley and Carstens, 2018) - together with the lack of relevant experience (Polymili, 2021; Pressley, 2020) a negative impact on the quality and effectiveness of their teaching, and led to frustration (Nikolopoulou, 2022) and awkwardness.

The official State as well as the school administration were officially in their assistance. However, the State contribution was deficient, which resulted in some teachers' being dissatisfied (Jurs and Kulberga, 2021). Besides the very basic – however extremely important – action that the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs took, by promptly providing the platforms for the implementation of synchronous and asynchronous remote education, the essential instructions for remote education, the activation of already-existing digital resources such as e.g. electronic libraries, digital lesson plans etc (Toledo Figueroa and Rawkins, 2020), it did not manage to provide teachers with the necessary technological equipment (Nikolopoulou, 2022), a problem that is generally faced by educational systems (Duroisin *et al.*, 2021; Schleicher, 2020), nor did it provide adequate and timely training for them to implement remote education (Nikolopoulou, 2022), a training that would constitute the key to their success (Bojović *et al.*, 2020; Muñoz-Najar *et al.*, 2021). Efforts were made to provide equipment by offering the school equipment, but they were inadequate. Additionally, a relevant training was held, however with a great delay, in a time period when almost all teachers already possessed most – if not all – the necessary knowledge.

The school administration appeared to have been closer to the teachers, together with the remote learning support team (Jurs and Kulberga, 2021; Meinck *et al.*, 2022; Nikiforos *et al.*, 2020; Papazoglou and Koutouzis, 2020 ; Truzoli *et al.*, 2020). The school administration managed to support them through good organization, through providing every piece of important information, but also through resolving potential problems they faced, while the support team – which consisted of teachers of the school, either ICT teachers or simple teachers that possessed certain specialized knowledge – responded to a satisfactory degree to its task by eagerly supporting the school staff. Moreover, it is worth mentioning that there was support among the teachers (Giasiranis and Sofos, 2021; Jurs and Kulberga, 2021; Temelli *et al.*, 2021) through formal as well as informal communication channels, which gave them the potential to exchange information, knowledge and experiences, all precious for the effectuation of their work (Nikiforos *et al.*, 2020; Papazoglou and Koutouzis, 2020).

5. Conclusions

After the return of education to normal operation (in-person) and "looking back" (reflecting on) the situations that all participants in education experienced from the spring of 2020 to the summer of 2021, we conclude that teachers and students, as well as their parents responded to the challenges of remote education that took place as an emergency and was long-lasting due to the Covid-19 pandemic, and acquired a precious experience in a very violent manner. Parallel to this, however, what surfaced were the deficiencies that education is facing, so much in infrastructure as in teacher training, in matters related to implementing remote education (Papazoglou and Koutouzis, 2020).

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