Implementing Marketing Principles in
Pre-university Education, during the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The global context changed, unexpectedly, in 2020, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The entire human activity was disrupted, and the decision-makers had to find solutions to solve all the problems which ensued.

The assimilation of ICT in the modernization of education has been a topic of interest for over two decades for various European and national organizations. By the beginning of 2020, many approaches had stopped at the debate and proposals' phase.

Ensuring the continuity of the education activity in the pandemic context has meant the start of the widespread use of ICT, but under very different conditions.

This study puts emphasis on the perceptions of pupils, parents, and teachers from a general school in Constanța regarding online education, but also on the awareness that the use of marketing principles is the way to correlate supply with educational demand, promote and strengthen the image of the school within the community.

1. Introduction

The complex approach to education reflects its importance in ensuring personal / individual and humankind progress, as a whole.

The history of humanity shows that education has developed at the same time with society, being both cause and effect, always acting as a factor of progress. Economic and social transformations have led to changes in education. Access to education has been different, over time and from one society to another. While, in the past, education was considered a privilege of the high-income social classes, today it is approached (by organizations, institutions, in national and international educational policies) as a fundamental human right. Comparative analyses show that between the level of economic and social development and the educational system of a country there is an obvious interdependence.

The change in the global context, due to the pandemic generated by the new Coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2), at the beginning of 2020, disturbed the entire economic and social activity, including the international education system.

Suddenly, the national school network units interrupted their traditional teaching activity and, being unprepared, began to look for solutions in the online environment, in order to ensure the continuity of pupils' education.

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic led to the widespread implementation of digital education (as a new, modern form, whose importance has been discussed since the 1990s), but it also accentuated / intensified the practice of educational marketing in order to correlate the needs with the educational offer, in the new context.

2. Theoretical background

It is clear that the increasing use of ICT (Information and Communications Technology) and digital technologies in the last two to three decades has brought both economic and professional, and social changes (Qualform, 2021). Many of the changes generated by digitalization are not yet understood in terms of the impact they might have, in different time horizons, from a social and economic point of view.

Undoubtedly, the rapid pace of the spread of the Internet and ICT has contributed to the development of the digital society and economy.

In the digital age, a concept used by certain specialists to characterize the current dimension of ICT, we are witnessing multiple changes; however, in the subject matter / content of this study we are defining a few modernization trends of education correlated with educational marketing aspects, in the new conjuncture, generated by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Issues related to the trend towards reorganizing education and training systems in Europe were widely debated at the Lisbon European Council in March 2000. It was emphasized, at that time, that education and training systems must adapt to the new realities of the 21st century. Digital technology is transforming every aspect of people's lives (Commission of the European Communities, 2000).

In this context, it was estimated that it was time for the education systems in all the countries of the world to be substantially reformed in terms of the forms and methods of conducting their activities, but also in terms of the behavior of the teaching staff, school managers, parents and, last but not least, pupils.

Education and training have been included in the 11 priorities of EU cohesion policy in the 2014-2020 period. The European Social Fund (ESF) and the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) support the activities which contribute to the modernization of the education and training systems, including investment in educational infrastructure (European Commission, 2021). Education is approached as an absolute priority by the governments of many states, and the United Nations included it in the Sustainable Development Goals of the 2030 Agenda.

In Romania, the digitalization of the education and training system has become a priority topic starting with 2016, when the Presidential Administration launched the country project entitled "Educated Romania" (Ministry of Education and Research, 2021). In the 2018-2020 Government Program, in the Chapter - Policies in the field of education, it is specified that: "We regard education as a strategic factor for development. Education has been and will remain an area of major interest, always on the public agenda" (Romanian Parliament, 2018; Government Program 2018-2020).

In the document "Education unites us. A vision for the future of education in Romania", drafted by the Ministry of Education and Research, the most relevant aspects related to the role of education are specified. It is assessed that education "has always had multiple roles for the individual and for the society, as well as significant implications for the economic prosperity of each individual, each community, each nation".

Marketing, at present, is a part (whether consciously or not) of any activity we carry out at work, at school, at home or in our free time. Marketing, as a science, has been defined differently, in certain stages of the economic and social evolution. Without intending to analyze the changes in the content of the definitions, we bring to attention some aspects related to the essence of marketing.

Professor Kotler considers that marketing "represents an economic and social mechanism through which individuals and groups satisfy their needs and desires through the creation and *exchange of goods, services and ideas between peers*" (Mâlcomete, 2003, p. 381). Professor Kotler also emphasizes that current marketing must be understood as the concern to "meet customer needs", a "process" that "creates value for the customers" and ensures "the development of close relationships with them" (Kotler and Armostrong, 2015, p. 5).

To put it simply, we can say that marketing represents the actions aimed at satisfying needs / desires through an *exchange (transfer / transactions)*.

On the other hand, education, seen as a result of the pedagogical activity (DEX, 1998) is considered a social process (Commission of the European Communities, 2010), a human activity carried out consciously in order to transmit scientific, technological, cultural, ethical, religious, etc. values (between people, generations), being considered the most important component of human society.

One can notice the presence, in the two activities - marketing and education - of the exchange / transfer / transmission of ideas, beliefs, knowledge, products and services.

Exchange is understood as the act by which someone obtains something he/she needs, from someone else, who is offering, by giving up something else, for what he/she receives. In the classical form, economic exchange takes place in the form of trading goods for money, but in the case of education (especially when we refer to compulsory education, provided by the state), exchange means the transfer of knowledge from the teaching staff in a school unit to the individual (pupil), without the latter giving up anything, for the moment (maybe, eventually, gratitude, satisfaction, admiration, attachment, etc.).

Educational marketing is a specialized field, aimed at implementing marketing optics in activities in the field of education, especially in teaching (Olteanu V., 2003, pp. 407-408).

In educational marketing, the representatives of the offer are (in most cases) school / educational units (in collaboration with the local and central administrations), the bearers of the demand (customers) are the individuals - pupils/students (influenced by parents, families), and the offer is represented by the educational services provided by the teaching staff.

Educational marketing uses traditional marketing concepts and tools (respectively the market, market segmentation, educational market participants, marketing mix, consumer behavior, analysis of the marketing environment, orientation of organizations towards the outside, i.e., knowing and meeting consumer needs / desires), but with certain peculiarities, specific to this field of activity.

Educational marketing can be understood as a useful tool in the effort of educational organizations to know, adapt and meet, as well as possible, the educational needs of their customers (pupils, parents, representatives of various organizations / associations), to organize, to cope with the changes in the environment, but also to promote and strengthen the image of the institution. Educational marketing supports school units to orient themselves towards the outside (respectively to the environmental changes and the expectations of the carriers of the demand for educational services), to create lasting / attachment relationships with their pupils, parents, the local community, to attract funds and other forms of support for teaching and extracurricular activities (Kotler and Armstrong, 2015, p. 5, p. 30).

3. Research methodology

In the present study, we have combined two types of research (Jupp, 2010, pp. 95-97; 102-103; 113-115; 117-119; Silverman, 2004, pp. 41-43; 48-54).

The desk research, based on the collection and interpretation of secondary information from the specialized literature and documents of some institutions and organizations, has been used to present the theoretical framework regarding the importance of education, the approaches to the current need for reforming education and correlating it with the ICT trends.

For the case study, we conducted (between 01.12.2020 and 15.01.2021) a type of direct research, a selective survey, in which we used three types of questionnaires, administered to the three samples: one consisting of pupils, another of their parents, and the other one of teaching staff from a school in the city of Constanța, where primary (grades 0-IV) and middle school (grades V-VIII) education is provided.

For the processing of the direct, quantitative information collected using questionnaires, we have used the IBM SPSS software, version 20.

4. Data, results and discussion

Certainly, in the history of the world, the March 2020 moment will remain a turning point for the entire evolution of the economic and social activity. The World Health Organization made it known, on March 11, 2020, that we were facing a pandemic generated by COVID-19. This change

in conjuncture was immediately perceived as a danger / threat to all mankind, which is why the leaders of most countries have started to introduce political, economic, social measures in order to protect the population. The educational activity, at international level, was quickly reconfigured.

In Romania, decisions started to be taken immediately, so that the activities of all pre-university education units were suspended starting with March 11, 2020 (Government of Romania, 2021).

Shortly afterwards, on March 16, 2020, due to the evolution of the number of people infected with COVID-19, a State of emergency was declared for 30 days, and classes in all educational units and institutions were suspended, tough restrictions being imposed regarding the movement of people. Other regulations followed, which extended the state of emergency on the Romanian territory, so that by the end of the second semester of the 2019-2020 school year, the teaching activity (throughout the state education system) was carried out using "alternative teaching-learning-assessment methods, in an online format" (President of Romania, 2020).

Starting with March 16, 2020, pupils and teachers were separated, isolated at home, restricted in terms of travel, distraught during the reconfiguration of the educational activity in an online format (there had been no, with very few exceptions, previous attempts in Romanian schools to use the new digital technologies).

Gradually, multiple technical-organizational problems have started to stand out, regarding the implementation of this mode of education: the lack of or inadequate endowment with digital equipment necessary for online activities, the limited skills (of some pupils and teachers) in their use, lack of or difficulties in connecting to the Internet, difficulties in adapting, concentrating and understanding, on the part of the pupils (especially the younger ones), the low interest of some teaching staff in finding suitable teaching methods, less teachers' control over pupils' knowledge acquiring process, etc.

Regarding the educational activity in the first semester of the 2020-2021 school year, it can be mentioned that several scenarios worked, applied differently, from one period to another, throughout the territory of the country; however, online school was predominant.

The marketing research that we have carried out for this article aimed to identify and quantify the main issues faced, for almost two semesters (the second, of the 2019-2020 school year and the first, of the 2020 -2021 school year), during the COVID-19 pandemic, by the pupils, their parents, and the teaching staff from a representative school unit in Constanța muncipality.

In order to gather information, we have developed three types of questionnaires - one for each category of participants in the educational activity. We have considered that the closed-ended questions and the use of statistical-mathematical tools, such as semantic differential and Likert Scale are the most appropriate in order to achieve the research objective. We also point out that while in the questionnaires there were some common questions, which were addressed to the three samples, we also asked questions that were specific to each sample. Given that this educational unit is a "general school", and the educational offer targets primary (grades 0-IV) and middle school (grades V-VIII) education, we have used a sample of pupils in grades II, IV, VI and VIII (these being the classes that, at the end of the school year, are to undergo an evaluation, according to Law no. 1/2011.

The questionnaires were available to be filled in online, between 01.12.2020 and 15.01.2021. The research results represent the processing of the answers obtained from 231 questionnaires completed by pupils, 28 questionnaires completed by teaching staff, and 228 questionnaires completed by pupils' parents. All the responses to the questionnaires were processed using IBM SPSS software version 20.

We will selectively present certain relevant aspects extracted from the results of the research.

The sample of pupils had the following structure: *32.46%* from the second grade; *10.83%* - fourth grade; *33.34%* - sixth grade; *23.37%* - eighth grade. Also, *120* pupils in the sample are girls (*51.94%*) and 111 are boys (*48.06%*).

The main aspects resulting from the processing of the information obtained from the *231* questionnaires completed by the pupils are the following:

- *43.21%* of those surveyed stated that they felt comfortable with carrying out online activities;
- *49.78%* stated that, in the first semester of the 2020-2021 school year, the online activity improved, compared to the second semester of the 2019-2020 school year (the period from the beginning of the pandemic), but, when asked to compare it with the first semester of the same

school year (2019-2020, a period in which the teaching activity was conducted under normal conditions), *54,11%* of them stated that they perceived a decrease in the quality of education;

- the main aspects that hindered the teaching activity, from the pupils' point of view, were: lack of good Internet connection (*25.97%*), lack of extracurricular materials adapted to the online system (*22.94%*), lack of adequate space at home for teaching activities (*22.51%*) and lack of a personal PC / laptop (*20.77%*);
- *87.12%* of pupils considered that the classes took place according to the schedule and *69.26%* of them received individual worksheets;
- regarding the online system, pupils consider it suitable for: teaching and doing exercises (*72.29%*); discussions and debates (*74.45%*) and viewing audio-video materials (*66.23%*);
- *71.42%* of pupils needed help from their parents and / or a tutor in order to carry out school tasks / activities;
- *83.11%* of pupils do not consider online school to be the future of education.

The sample of teaching staff used in this research had the following structure: *64.28%* of them have a seniority in education of more than 25 years; *53.57%* are teaching staff carrying out primary education activity and *46.43%* - middle school education activity; *96.42%* are women.

The main aspects resulting from the processing of the information obtained from the 28 questionnaires completed by the teaching staff are the following:

- *57.14%* of teachers answered that they felt comfortable, to a large extent, with online school;
- *71.43%* had the opinion that in the first semester of the 2020-2021 school year the way of conducting the online activity had improved, compared to the second semester of the 2019-2020 school year (the period from the beginning of the pandemic); however, *53.57%* considered that there was a decrease in the quality of education, compared to the first semester of the same school year (2019-2020, when the teaching activity was conducted under normal conditions);
- the main aspects that hindered the teaching activity, from the teachers' point of view, were: lack of a good Internet connection (*57.14%*), lack of pupils' participation / motivation (*46.42%*) and lack of a PC / personal laptop (*39.28%*);
- *75%* of teachers consider that they have managed to adapt the educational content and type of teaching to the needs of all the pupils;
- *60.71%* of teachers answered that they will use elements of online education after returning to the traditional system for the following types of activities: teaching (*46.42%*), homework (*39.28%*), assessment (*53, 71%*), guidance/tutoring and extracurricular activities (*28.57%*);
- *10.71%* of teachers considered that the transition to online education had a positive effect on pupils;
- *17.85%* of teaching staff stated that the transition towards online is the future of education.

The size of the parents' sample (*228*) was very close to the size of the pupils' sample (*231*), which shows the interest and participation in the education of their children. In terms of structure, the sample consisted of: *37.71%* parents of pupils in the second grade, *15.8%* parents of pupils in the fourth grade, *5.44%* parents of pupils in the sixth grade and *21.05%* parents of eighth grade pupils; *84.65%* of the parents are women and *15.35%* are men.

The results obtained from the processing of the information from the 228 completed questionnaires are the following:

- *73.25%* of parents considered that online education is not suitable for their children;
- *63.59%* believe that, in the first semester of the 2020-2021 school year, the online activity improved, compared to the second semester of the 2019-2020 school year (the period since the beginning of the pandemic); however, *61.4%* of them considered that there was a decrease in the quality of education, compared to the first semester of the same school year (2019-2020, when the teaching activity was conducted under normal conditions);
- among the main aspects that hindered the teaching activity for their children, the following were mentioned by the parents: lack of a good Internet connection (*29.82%*), lack of extracurricular materials adapted to the online system (*33.34%*), lack of a high-performance individual PC / laptop (*17.53%*) and lack of adequate space, at home, in order to participate in classes (*15.78%*);
- *77.19%* of parents had the opinion that the type of teaching and the educational content were not adapted to their child's needs;

- in a proportion of *62.72%*, it was more difficult for the parents to supervise the online education activity of their children, in a context in which they themselves carried out their professional activity from home or in the workplace;
- *50.44%* resorted to the supplementation of the children's training;
- *70.22%* appreciated, to a large extent, the effort made by the school in terms of transferring the teaching activity to the online system;
- *13.15%* of parents considered that online school had a positive impact on their child;
- *76.75%* of parents do not consider online school to be the future of education.

5. Conclusions

The research has brought to our attention the main aspects faced by each category of participants in the educational activity (pupils, teachers, and parents) in a representative school unit, in Constanța municipality, for two semesters, during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The conclusions presented are specific to the school unit analyzed. It has existed for over 50 years (being founded in 1968), was noted for the quality of the managerial act, aimed at forming a team of well-trained teaching staff, able to apply teaching methods appropriate to the needs of the pupils, but also correlated with the requirements of a modern, high-performance education. Furthermore, the material base of the school has been constantly improved and modernized, so that the pupils could benefit from appropriate conditions for carrying out the didactic and extra-didactic activities.

These aspects, along with the knowledge and implementation of marketing principles are factors which contributed to a good preparation of generations of pupils (recognized via the results obtained by them in the National Test, at the end of the 8th grade, in competitions and Olympiads), and also to creating a positive image for this school. This explains the increased interest of pupils and parents in choosing the educational offer of this school.

The results of the quantitative research, obtained for this study, were capitalized by the school unit's managerial staff, in order to make decisions aimed at adapting the educational offer to the needs expressed by the pupils and their parents regarding the teaching activity in the online system, but also in order to develop the communication between the three parties so as to improve the quality of education.

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