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Perspectives of Teachers and Students on Online Religious Education during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Perspectives of Teachers and Students on Online Religious Education during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

This paper investigates the views of theology teachers and students regarding distance learning in the Religious Education course during the COVID-19 pandemic. It consists of a theoretical and research methodology section. The theoretical background includes a) Religious Education in Greece, b) the concept of distance learning, c) the teacher's role in online education, d) implementation of distance learning in Greek schools during the pandemic, e) teachers' perspectives, and f) students' perspectives. The research adopts a qualitative methodology, using interviews with sixteen secondary education theology teachers. Data was analyzed using content analysis by category. The study explores how teachers adapted to digital teaching and how students responded. Key questions include participation levels, engagement with the subject, and digital literacy among both educators and learners. Findings indicate that digital tools, when used pedagogically, enhanced students' interest in Religious Education without compromising educational quality.

Keywords: *Distance learning, religious education, new technologies, pandemic, secondary education*

Introduction

The way Religious Education is taught in Greece has changed significantly in recent decades. From a catechism-type approach, with an emphasis on the Orthodox tradition and the concept of "Hellenic Christianity," the subject now attempts to respond to the needs of a pluralistic society (Karamouzis, 2015b). The modern school classroom

includes students with diverse cultural and religious representations, and the Religious Education lesson must be objective, scientific, and oriented towards the cultivation of religious freedom and democratic consciousness (Karamouzis, 2008). The COVID-19 pandemic imposed new conditions on the educational process, including distance learning. Religious Education (RE) was not left unaffected, as questions arose regarding the effectiveness of teaching and the achievement of learning objectives through digital media (Tsirevelos, 2022). Challenges such as the active participation of students and the inspiring role of the teacher came to the fore (Koukounaras Liangis, 2019). This study focuses on the quality of distance learning during the pandemic through the experiences and narratives of teachers and students. The methodology is qualitative, using the narrative approach. The main objectives are to record the way in which distance learning is implemented, the role of the teacher, as well as the views of those involved on the efficiency of the process. The research aspires to highlight how distance learning can remain pedagogically effective, even in crisis conditions.

Theoretical background

The Religious Studies Course (RSC) remains mandatory from the 3rd grade of primary school to the 3rd grade of high school, based on the Constitution. The new Curricula (CS) of 2016–2018 attempted to open up to diversity while maintaining the Orthodox orientation, which provoked reactions and appeals to the Council of State. The 2020 CS re-emphasized Orthodox identity, limiting religious elements (Government Gazette 7659/2020, 7739/2020), while the 2023 CS proposed an anthropological and pedagogical view of the course as a "culture course" (Government Gazette 5130/2024). Exemption remains a right only for those of other faiths. Distance education, with historical roots in the 19th century, has evolved significantly through technology (Simonson et al., 2015; Keegan, 1980; Moore & Kearsley, 1996). The teacher now functions as a guide, with increased needs for digital and pedagogical skills, while learning becomes interdisciplinary and multi-literate, combining religious and digital literacy (Mitropoulou, 2021; Tsirevelos, 2024).

Distance education is a concept that has been defined by various researchers. Distance education has had a significant impact on the field of education since its emergence in the 19th century as a means of communication. It has taken various forms and has used a wide variety of technologies ranging from the postal technologies of the 19th century to virtual reality today. Distance education has been one of the leading topics discussed in education in recent years, with influences coming from the "open" movement, including massive open online courses (MOOCs) and open educational resources (OER) (Simonson et al., 2015). Various definitions have been given, as mentioned earlier, as to the nature of what distance education is and what it entails.

Keegan (1980) defined the concept of distance education more clearly, gathering these ideas from the past and examining the rapid growth of the distance education phenomenon. Keegan used these six elements to define distance education: 1) separation of teacher and student, 2) influence of an educational organization, 3) use of technical means, 4) two-way communication, 5) possibility of occasional seminars, and 6) participation in a more industrial form of education (p. 33). In the book "Handbook of

Distance Education" (2013), which many researchers have used as a reference, Black emphasized that 1980 was a significant year for distance education. This year, the definition of distance education was refined as Keegan synthesized dominant thoughts from previous years (Moore & Anderson, 2007). Moore & Kearsley confirmed that this became "the most widely cited definition of distance education" (1996, p. 229).

Most historical research agrees that the concept of distance education implies a separation between students and teachers, which must be overcome by some means of technology. Even today, this bridge of distance through technology is confirmed in modern definitions (Keegan, 2013; National Center for Education Statistics, 2021). To these two main points, Simonson and Seepersaud (2019) added the criteria of being part of an educational organization, having two-way communication, and providing personalized instruction. The above criteria are hotly contested in modern discussions as experts in this field struggle to create a single definition of distance education.

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the transition to distance learning. The Webex, e-me, and e-class platforms were used extensively, despite technical problems and lack of guidance (Martinou & Kolokotronis, 2022; Webex, 2022). Although isolation affected emotional and social development (Cambi, 2006; Frabboni, 2009), new possibilities in digital communication and lesson organization were recorded (Kalampichis, 2021; e-me Digital Educational Platform, 2022). Despite the challenges, teachers and students recognized the benefits of distance learning, such as the multimedia approach and flexibility (Katsiapi & Valasidou, 2021; Addimando et al., 2021). However, psychosomatic fatigue, lack of interaction, and the need to return to face-to-face education emerged as critical issues (Vo & Ho, 2024; Černochová et al., 2024).

Research Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative methodology with an emphasis on narrative research, as it examines the personal narratives of sixteen theology teachers regarding the transition from in-person to distance learning during the pandemic. The choice of a narrative approach was deemed appropriate for the in-depth exploration of the participants' experiences, aiming to understand the utilization of New Technologies in the teaching of Religious Studies (Creswell, 2016; Casey, 1995/1996). Data collection was carried out through personal narratives recorded with Zoom and transcribed with HyperTRANSCRIBE. Analysis was carried out with the HyperRESEARCH software and followed the Grounded Theory process of Strauss & Corbin (2015), with line-by-line coding and the creation of categories based on recurring ideas. The continuous interpretation and verification of the data allowed the development of reliable conclusions. Despite the useful findings, the research has limitations, mainly due to the small sample, the lack of triangulation, and the inability to collect data from students (especially during July). In addition, there is limited available literature regarding the distance teaching of Religious Studies during a pandemic, which made it difficult to establish the theoretical foundation of the study.

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this paper is to investigate how sixteen theological educators dealt with the distance teaching of the RE course during the pandemic. The research questions are the following:

- How did you as a teacher of theology and your students cope with distance teaching?
    - Did you as a teacher cope with these new teaching conditions?
    - Did your students participate in the digital classroom as they did in the traditional classroom?
    - Did your digital teaching method stimulate your students' interest in the RE course?
    - To what extent are you, as a theologian, familiar with New Technologies?
    - At what level of digital literacy are you, as a theologian, and your students?

Research limitations and difficulties

A significant limitation of the research is the sample size. Although the sample consists of sixteen teachers, which is a satisfactory number of people for a qualitative study, and they work in different schools from almost all regions of Greece, its size does not allow the generalization of the results for several reasons. First, because the number of teachers is generally small, so we cannot generalize their views. Second, the experience of distance learning differs significantly from teacher to teacher, as each school has its own equipment in terms of New Technologies and the level of digital literacy is different. In addition, there is a time limitation, as the research must be implemented in a specific period, the summer period when the researcher's obligations were fewer and the teachers were on leave. This resulted in the collection of quantitative data from the students not being possible as, the data collection took place in July when the students were not in school. With this limitation, the mixed method was not applied, which would have led to the triangulation of the results. Regarding the difficulties of the research, it was the lack of an extensive bibliography on this issue, as the coronavirus pandemic is something that has happened for the first time to humanity. The topic is also focused on distance education and the pandemic, which made it difficult for the researcher in the process of finding scientific material, as the majority of the research that has been published so far is about distance education and the pandemic in a more general context and not about this specific subject.

Results – Discussion

According to the interviewees' responses, all the teachers of the Theological Seminary generally coped —with variations— with the demands of distance learning. Characteristically, five theological teachers report that they coped successfully *["Yes, very much!" (E1), "Yes, very well, and I think to a high degree. I am not saying this to praise myself, because it was something I used to use; I just put more emphasis on it." (E2), "I*

think I coped excellently and more than enough" (E6), "I coped, I think successfully, but with a lot of work." (E7), "Yes, yes, I coped positively, I think." (E8)]. If this is combined with other research on the religious faith of theologians and the RE course (Koukounaras Liagis & Sekadakis, 2022; Zefkili, 2022) but also with research related to the pandemic, it reveals that many deeply religious people perceived the pandemic in a direct and even eschatological dimension with religion, and especially Christianity (Karamouzis et al., 2023).

However, despite the difficulties, the teachers of the Religious Education Department did not seem to be affected by these issues. Rather, they sought to function as professionals and strive for effective learning, regardless of their knowledge of digital tools, etc. Such an approach highlights the way to transform a challenge into a creative opportunity by overcoming various adversities in education and especially in the Religious Education Department (Tsirevelos, 2021). The educational program implemented in the Religious Education course was an innovative initiative, which served as a bridge between the past and the present. It creatively combined traditional sciences —such as History, Philosophy, and Theology— with modern methods and tools of new technologies. From the exploration of the writing and materials of ancient manuscripts to their digital capture, the benefits of collaboration between scientific knowledge and technological innovation were evident (Farsiarotou, 2022).

In the context of the new curriculum for the RE course in school, the Institute of Educational Policy (IEP) has developed and made available educational materials and guides for teachers. These materials include books for all grades of primary and secondary school, as well as teaching guides that support teachers in the implementation of the new approach (Government Gazette 7659/04-03-2020). The implementation of the new program is accompanied by training programs for teachers, aiming to strengthen their skills in the use of new methods and tools. In addition, support is provided through online platforms and learning communities, where teachers can exchange experiences and good practices (Government Gazette 7659/04-03-2020). Through an interdisciplinary approach, the students of the 2nd Gymnasium had the opportunity to learn about the value of ancient writing materials, to understand the historical course of the Holy Bible, and to encounter the wealth of biblical and patristic texts. At the same time, using New Technologies, they understood the importance of these texts in the modern digital era and the role of technology in their preservation, promotion, and enhancement (Mitropoulou, 2022).

The implementation of the two programs within the context of the Religious Studies course offered significant benefits to both students and teachers (Farsiarotou, 2022). Through the experiential approach, students' skills and creative abilities were highlighted, confirming Dewey's view that "only that which touches the soul is truly learned and becomes part of the character" (Dewey, 1938, p. 82). In this way, a broader framework of multiliteracies was served, which in this case includes religious, theological, artistic, and digital literacy (Mitropoulou, 2021).

The participation of students with refugee and migrant backgrounds highlighted the value of inclusion in school life, while collaboration between students, teachers of different specialties, and external agencies emerged as a key factor for success (Magos,

2022). Through these programs, the new perspectives and possibilities of the Religious Studies course were revealed (Tsirevelos, 2023). In this way, a clear message was given regarding the implementation of educational actions even in difficult times, such as the pandemic: when there is vision, cooperation, and will from the educational community, no obstacle is insurmountable (Farsiarotou, 2022).

If we compare them with other studies of teachers in the Greek Higher Education System, where the difficulties of teachers in modern learning are investigated, the percentages are approximately the same both with success and with difficulty (Kornaraki, 2023; Nazar, 2020; Karamouzis et al., 2019; Grilis, 2019; Vallianatos, 2019). The importance of interaction is also highlighted, which concerns teaching in the classroom but also in distance education. The theory of modern learning with reference to interaction, teamwork, critical thinking, knowledge transformation, reflection, and the cultivation of democratic skills.

Ten of the sixteen teachers report that their students participated in the RE course: [*"They participated, and I can say that the special thing I gained from my contacts with colleagues is that opportunities were given to children who in their traditional classroom did not speak, and were shy; in the digital classroom, they gained a voice." (E1), "Yes, and perhaps this is also an empirical observation that I will make now, that many children, perhaps because they did not speak and write on Padlet, made the digital poster, made their texts, and participated more." (E2), "In general, the students participated, and I noticed this from their work, and from their participation when I separated them into rooms, I knew that they would be there at any time. I know that they participated." (E3)*].

In 2022, a study was conducted on the topic of "The use of the Prezi Video application in teaching the subject of Religious Studies" (Modern and Asynchronous Education) (Gaitanos, 2022). More specifically, it is found through research that the application of this method was more successful and effective among high school students compared to those in middle school. This results not only from the responses to the questionnaires —although middle school students also showed a positive attitude— but also from personal observations during the lesson. High school students, due to their age and maturity, responded more positively to the challenge. They watched the relevant video with greater interest and enthusiasm, participating actively either with questions or by expressing their opinions.

According to teachers of theology, the digital teaching method greatly motivated your students' interest in the Religious Education lesson: [*"Very much. I think it's one of the phases where the children were waiting to be connected at least." (E1), "Yes, more. This is evident both from the assignments and from the participation of the children who did not miss the lesson. In fact, once my power went out, I was unable to come in to teach a lesson, and I received an email: "Sir, why weren't you there today? You didn't inform us," and I explained to them that I had no power. I think it motivated them; it was a different lesson, more creative." (E2)*].

Overall, the level of the lesson proved to be higher, which contributed to both the development of meaningful dialogue and understanding of the content — which was the main goal of this method. In contrast, in the high school, it was observed that, although the students initially showed enthusiasm, their attention and interest then

decreased. Many stopped watching at the same pace, while participation after the video was shown was limited, which indicated that they did not watch the material consistently. It even seemed that they preferred to watch the videos at home, in a quieter environment.

Thus, it was deemed necessary to make adjustments to the teaching method for middle school students. Shorter videos, the use of images, and an emphasis on classroom discussion were suggested, with the aim of maintaining interest and facilitating understanding. At the same time, enhancing the e-class with additional material helped to create a balanced learning model that better meets the needs of students of this age. Middle school students seem to respond better to short, targeted stimuli that enhance direct participation and collaboration.

At this point, it should be emphasized that most teachers reported that they are familiar with New Technologies and the level of digital literacy was high among both teachers and students. Specifically, one teacher states, *[E2: "As I said at a high level, very advanced, I do seminars on distance education at the university in Tirana, and here in Greece I also did seminars from the Ministry. I am a trainer A´ at the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs on these issues of distance education, so I am at a sufficient level. Now the students could answer themselves, but I tried to familiarize myself, as I said in another part of the interview that I dedicated time to do a Religious Studies lesson and to see the platform and each tool. Therefore, I think it was enough. Because today I think all this software is very easy for both the children and us."].*

As for the high school students, they showed a preference for the method as initially implemented. The combination of classroom attendance and quick repetition at home via video seemed to serve them, especially due to their increased school obligations and preparation for the national exams. Interaction is important everywhere. The teacher is in the role of an orchestrator (Magos, 2022; Koukounaras Liagis, 2019; Dimitriadou, 2016). The integration of the arts in Religious Education can be achieved with the help of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) (Tsirevelos, 2022). Beyond the simple presentation of works of art, emphasis is placed on the active participation and creativity of the students, as well as their interaction with the teacher. This approach enhances a deeper understanding of religious content while at the same time offering an opportunity for more creative and experiential teaching that focuses on the student (Tsirevelos, 2022).

It is a challenge and a vision at the same time, as the teacher is called upon to inspire students to act autonomously and to explore and evaluate new knowledge (Tsirevelos, 2022). Instead of conventional frontal teaching, he uses his imagination and knowledge to create an environment that encourages the production of original digital material with religious content by the students themselves (Tsirevelos, 2022). This pedagogical vision is based on adapting religious education to the needs and interests of students — and among them are undoubtedly new technologies. Thus, ICTs do not remain simply means of communication or entertainment but are transformed into essential tools for learning, creativity, and cultural expression (Tsirevelos, 2022).

Another axis is the continuous training of teachers in both religious education and new technologies, as emphasized in other research (Ifantis et al., 2022; Mitropoulou,

2021; Karamouzis & Tsirevelos, 2019). The research by Karakostantakis and Stavrianos (2024), where ICT was utilized in the teaching of Religious Studies showed that religious education, as a subject that aims at spiritual cultivation, moral development, and strengthening the cultural background of students, is necessary to adapt to modern technological developments. The utilization of ICT can offer new perspectives and alternative ways of approaching the topics of the course, enhance the interest of students, and make teaching more interesting and effective. Media such as computers, portable devices, and digital tools in general contribute substantially to the collection, processing, and presentation of information and are valuable aids for a better approach to the subject matter of Religious Studies (Karakostantaki & Stavrianos, 2024).

Digital storytelling offers the necessary means for students to be able to express themselves creatively, produce meanings, communicate with each other, and share personal experiences within the school context (Gioura & Zafiri, 2020). Through this process, students construct knowledge in an active and experiential way, while the role of the teacher changes (Gioura & Zafiri, 2022). It is no longer limited to ordinary, traditional teaching but transforms the lesson, utilizing digital storytelling in a creative and constructive way. Knowledge, thus, is not taught mechanically but is acquired through the personal involvement and experience of students (Gioura & Zafiri, 2022). All of the above clearly highlights the importance of digital storytelling in the educational process. It is a powerful tool, not only to initiate learning or present its results, but also —mainly— as a means of personal expression for the student (Gioura & Zafiri, 2022).

Conclusion

Teachers report that the use of digital tools and methods in teaching has substantially increased students' interest in the subject of RE. This observation is also confirmed by the maintenance of almost constant levels of student participation during distance learning, compared to traditional face-to-face education. According to relevant research (Gioura & Zafeiri, 2020), the integration of interactive digital media, such as digital storytelling, videos, and online presentations (Prezi, Canva), as well as the use of platforms such as e-class, enhance students' learning engagement, concentration, and self-activity. In addition, they offer an environment more adapted to the needs of digital native students, with an emphasis on experiential learning, collaboration, and personal expression. These data show that, when digital technologies are used in a pedagogically evidence-based way, the quality of learning is not reduced – on the contrary, it can be upgraded, even in times of crisis such as the pandemic, enhancing inclusion and a student-centered approach.

More specifically, the research findings show that the use of digital tools not only enhanced student participation but also allowed the emergence of key characteristics of religious education in the digital environment while maintaining its pedagogical and spiritual essence. It was observed that the use of digital storytelling tools (e.g. video storytelling, Canva, PowerPoint with narration) provided space for personal expression, resulting in students connecting experientially to religious concepts (such as faith, forgiveness, and hope) with personal or social experiences. Also, the ability to choose a way of working (e.g., through collaborative presentations or individual creations)

enhanced self-activity and empathy, values that are at the core of religious education. The interdisciplinary approach became more easily applicable through the interconnection of Religious Studies topics with history, art, and social issues (such as the pandemic, solidarity, and the environment), which expanded the interpretive and existential dimension of the course.

Regarding online discussion (in forums or through platforms such as e-class), it provided a safe environment for the exchange of views, even for students who hesitate to express themselves in a physical classroom, enhancing pluralism and tolerance. It was also important to note that students with different religious or cultural backgrounds responded positively to assignments based on global values and interfaith themes, which enhances inclusion and intercultural awareness. In summary, the research demonstrates that when digital tools are used with awareness of the pedagogical physiognomy of the RE course, then its pedagogical, value-based, and existential dimension is not only maintained but also upgraded, offering opportunities for deeper and more meaningful student engagement, even in the context of distance learning.

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