Online Education during Pandemic: Sharenting vs. Children's Right to their Own Image and Education

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Abstract: This article examines the legal issues that have forced the transition to an online school learning process for children, caused by the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus and the pandemic. Although we believe that from a legal point of view, children's access to education must be respected, the article highlights the problems regarding the amplification of the sharenting phenomenon (already at worrying levels), determined by the transition to online learning. The article shows that the development of the educational process in the online environment determines the amplification of the sharenting phenomenon: this happens because teachers and parents have no legal knowledge and have not been trained on the risks of the online environment and the limits to children's rights (posting videos and audio of children in the online educational process); the school educational process takes place through social media platforms that are not designed for online learning and are not prepared to respect the child's right to his own image and his privacy and dignity. The article also analyzes the legal implications in the European context related to children's rights,

Keywords: *the child's right to education; online education during pandemic; SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus (COVID-19); sharenting; the child's right his own image.*

How to cite: Dobrilă, M. C. (2021). Online Education during Pandemic: Sharenting vs. Children's Right to their Own Image and Education. *Revista Romaneasca pentru Educatie Multidimensionala*, 13(1), 431-446.
<https://doi.org/10.18662/rrem/13.1/380>

1. Considerations on the COVID-19 pandemic, online educational process and sharenting

After the state of emergency was declared in Romania on March 16, 2020 by Presidential Decree no. 195 of March 16, 2020, published in Official Gazette no. 212 of March 16, 2020, and then extended by Presidential Decree no. 240 of April 14, 2020, published in the Official Gazette no. 311 of April 14, 2020, in order to prevent the spread of COVID-19 (declared as pandemic on 11 March 2020 by the „World Health Organization” (World Health Organization, 2020)), followed by the establishment of the state of alert starting with May 18, 2020 (by Government Decision no. 394 of May 18, 2020, published in the Official Gazette no. 410 of May 18, 2020, corroborated with Law no. 55 of May 15, 2020 on „some measures to prevent and combat the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic”), the learning process in schools and universities experienced a wide transformation, determined by the need to adapt to a learning system online, obviously necessary in order to continue the learning process and to ensure the children's right to education.

However, the forced transition to an online learning process for children, carried out through social media platforms that are not adapted and prepared to ensure the protection of children's rights in this context, to an online learning process through parents and teachers who request and transmit images of children (photos, videos), without fully understanding the responsibility they have, accentuated the previously existing problems regarding a phenomenon known among specialists as *sharenting* (*share-parenting*).

The term *sharenting* („online sharing about parenting”) refers to the way refers to the way parents, who should act as protectors of children's online identity, share information and images about their children's lives online, which raises a conflict between parents' rights and children's rights, that is, the parent's right to share information online and the child's interest in healthy development and privacy (Steinberg, 2017, pp. 842-844).

Sharenting refers to the ways that parents use the Internet and social media to distribute pictures and videos with their children; this parents practice produce an online identity for children sometimes impossible for the child to hide, with potential risks (online predators), with negative effects of embarrassing information or pictures of the children posted online, and with a potential violation of children's right to privacy (Blecher-Prigat, 2020, p. 373).

Sharenting is described as a term denoting „when parents share information about themselves and their children online”, and they post online images, videos of and stories about children; regarding the questions whether „parents are infringing their children’s right to privacy”, it should be noted that „French law allows adult children to sue their parents for such infringements” (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2017, p. 2).

At first glance, the context of the pandemic, which led to the transition to online education, seems to justify greater freedom for parents to transmit information about their children online, arguing that in the online learning process teachers ask parents images and video with children on the activities received by children as homework. Moreover, teachers use audio and video images of students to justify the conduct of online educational activity during the suspension of face-to-face learning courses (the Romanian Ministry of Education and Research has not established clear rules on the proof required of teachers for online classes). In reality, we believe that especially in the context of online school education due to the pandemic, children's rights must be protected, especially by parents and teachers, as key actors involved in the learning process, who must participate with increased responsibility and concern for the impact on the child's online identity.

2. Online education and sharenting: the child's right to education vs. the child's right to privacy and own image. Legal perspectives in a european context

The National Committee for Special Emergency Situations decided to suspend the educational process in public schools initially, from 11 March 2020, until March 22, 2020 (Decision No. 6 of 9 March 2020 on the approval of additional measures intended to combat the new Coronavirus, Brochure no. 1 of March 9, 2020), then extended during the state of emergency and the state of alert, until the end of the school year (with some exceptions regarding students in the final years, in compliance with the prevention measures, established by the „Joint Order of the Minister of Education and Research and of the Minister of Health no. 4220/769/8.05.2020”, published in the Official Gazette no. 381/12.05.2020). With regard to higher education, according to the international recommendations on measures to combat and prevent the spread of COVID-19 and based on the recommendation of the Ministry of Education and Research of 10 March 2020 to suspend teaching activities and to organize them through online platforms (Ministry of Education and Research, 2020), Romanian universities have decided to suspend courses

(the universities autonomy) in order to limit the spread of coronavirus, first until March 31, 2020, and then extended until the end of the school year, with online bachelor's and dissertation exams (based on The Order no. 4206/06.05.2020 of the Ministry of Education and Research on measures in higher education in Romania, published in Official Gazette no. 372 of 08.05.2020). Regarding the suspension of the education process in schools, the „Group of Technical-Scientific Support Regarding the Management of Highly Contagious Diseases on the Territory of Romania” recommended "the use of alternative teaching methods of education" (Group of Technical-Scientific Support, 2020), according to the previous model proposed to combat the effects of the 2009 A/H1N1 virus pandemic virus, which indicates the extent of the learning process through e-learning systems, with audio and video transmissions (The Government Gradual Intersectoral Framework, 2009).

As a response to online education challenges, UNESCO recommends educational distance learning solutions, to facilitate student learning during periods of school closure (UNESCO, 2020).

In order to ensure the right to education and taking into account the respect for this right, teachers have adapted online communication platforms to ensure the continuity of the learning process in schools; however, no special training adapted to this educational process or special counseling and guidance was provided by the Ministry of Education, especially regarding the measures required to respect the rights of children involved in this online process.

The right to education is guaranteed by the Romanian Constitution through article 32; the right to life, intimate, the right to private life and family, guaranteed by Article 30, as well as the child's right to his own image must also be respected.

The Ministry of Education (to ensure the right to education) regulated (by the Instruction of April 21, 2020) the measures established for continuing the learning process at the pre-university education system and the “National Educational Intervention Plan for suspending pre-university education courses” was developed. Although reference is made in the Instruction to the "transfer of good practice in online learning" and to the "needs for the development of digital skills of teachers", we consider that there is a lack of indications on measures taken to protect children's rights in the online learning process, a high-risk space, as the platforms are not prepared to ensure the protection of children's rights.

Regarding the right to education, based on article 165 of „The Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union”, „Official Journal of the

European Union” C 326, 26.10.2012), „Union shall contribute to the development of quality education by encouraging cooperation between Member States, and by supporting their action”, and the Union pursues, among other things, the development of distance education. One of the six European Commission's priorities for 2019-2024 is ”A Europe fit for the digital age” (European Commission, 2020a).

The European Commission is launching initiatives to create a "European Area of Education", and among the measures are also those that address „digital skills” (European Commission, 2020c). The Commission has adopted an „Action Plan for Digital Education” for the development of digital competences in education, which sets out measures „to support the use of technology and the development of digital skills in education” (European Commission, 2020b).

Sharenting means "making public by parents a lot of detailed information about their children in the form of photos, videos and posts through social media, which violate children's privacy" (Brosch, 2018, p. 78). Research has shown that „parents are concerned about their children's privacy, but they still see benefits from sharing information about them because of the social support they receive” (Brosch, 2018, p. 77). Parents are the „gatekeepers of personal information” of their children and they must protect their children's privacy in the online space (Brosch, 2018, p. 80).

Starting from the fact that the development of the education process is now carried out online through various methods and platforms or through social media, the question arises whether sharenting will gain momentum and will be "encouraged" by the fact that parents will now have "justification" for transmitting numerous information and images of the child's life on social media (usually with the best intentions, but without precautions), determined by the development of online learning.

„Freedom of expression” is a fundamental human right, regulated by the „Universal Declaration of Human Rights”, Article 19, and by the „International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights” (Article 19). The right to freedom of expression is protected under the European Convention on Human Rights, Article 10: „ Everyone has the right to freedom of expression. This right shall include freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart information and ideas without interference by public authority and regardless of frontiers. This Article shall not prevent States from requiring the licensing of broadcasting, television or cinema enterprises.”, but „the exercise of these freedoms, since it carries with it duties and responsibilities (...)”. At European level, „Charter Of Fundamental Rights Of The European Union” (2016/C 202/02) reaffirms in Article 11 freedom

of expression and information. Romanian citizens enjoy the right to freedom of expression granted to them by the Romanian Constitution, Article 30; New Romanian Civil Code– Law no. 287/2009– regulates in Article 70 freedom of expression.

According to the „Universal Declaration of Human Rights”, the right to education is recognized for all persons (Article 26). The Protocol No. 1 to the „European Convention on Human Rights” states that no person shall be denied the right and access to education (Article 2). Romanian citizens shall have the right (and access) to education granted to them by the Romanian Constitution, in Article 32.

„Charter Of Fundamental Rights Of The European Union” recognizes in Article 14 the right to education: „1. Everyone has the right to education and to have access to vocational and continuing training. 2. This right includes the possibility to receive free compulsory education. 3. The freedom to found educational establishments with due respect for democratic principles and the right of parents to ensure the education and teaching of their children in conformity with their religious, philosophical and pedagogical convictions shall be respected, in accordance with the national laws governing the exercise of such freedom and right.”.

The online education process during the pandemic, along with the specific problems of the sharenting phenomenon, raise issues related to ensuring the child's right to privacy; this happens when parents' freedom of expression is questioned, manifested by publishing children's images on social platforms or in different learning platforms, even if the act itself seems (at the moment) to be justified by the parents' attempt to determine the child's participation in the online school education process.

The „right to privacy” is a fundamental human right, enshrined in Article 12 of the „Universal Declaration of Human Rights”, and in Article 17 of the „International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights”. The „right to respect for private and family life” is protected under the „European Convention on Human Rights”, in Article 8. Personal and family privacy is stated in Romanian Constitution in Article 26 - „The public authorities shall respect and protect the intimate, family and private life. (...)”. New Romanian Civil Code – Law no. 287/2009– states in Article 71 that „everyone has the right to respect for his private life”.

There is the issue of respecting the right to the child's own image, given the use of his image by parents (sharenting) and teachers, even in the context of the online school education process.

The right to own image, as a component of the „right to privacy”, is regulated in Article 73 of the New Civil Code.

Regarding the transmission of children's images by parents on social media platforms, there are relevant provisions in „Law no. 272/21 June 2004 on the protection and promotion of children's rights” (Official Gazette no. 159 of 5 March 2014): the provisions on the right of the child to protect his public image and his intimate, private and family life, being prohibited any action likely to affect the public image of the child or his right to intimate, private and family life (art. 27).

These problems indicated above are accentuated by the fact that the Supreme Court (the „High Court of Cassation and Justice of Romania”) ruled that it is considered a public space if posts are made on social networks (The High Court of Cassation and Justice of Romania, 2014).

The Romanian Ombudsman emphasizes the importance of protecting the public image and the intimate, private and family life of the child because the information about the child transmitted on the Internet can no longer be controlled (Romanian Ombudsman, 2016).

„The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child” recommends that the State strengthen its efforts, in cooperation with the media, to protect and respect the privacy of children (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2017).

„The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child” states, in the preamble, that the well-being of children is important, that they should receive protection and assistance; emphasis is placed on the responsibilities of parents in the development of the child, on respect for the right to privacy (art. 16), on the free expression of the child (art. 13) and on respect for the opinion of the child (art. 12). Given that parents are involved with teachers in the process of online education during the pandemic, it is essential the role of parents in the development and guidance of the child, and they must be educated and informed so as to act responsibly (UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1990).

„The Council of Europe's New Strategy for the Rights of the Child (2016-2021)” adopted on 2 March 2016, among the five priority areas, also indicates children's rights in digital matters. Children live in a digital world and are subject to specific risks, and this is much more evident in the case of online school education (Council of Europe, 2016).

Regarding the extent of the phenomenon of sharenting in the conditions of online school education and the role of parents as protectors of children's rights, it is necessary to focus on the „best interests of the child”, his well-being, the joint efforts of state institutions, and on parental responsibility (National Authority for the Protection of the Rights of the Child and Adoption, 2014, pp. 3, 5].

3. Results of some of the online education surveys and of the sharenting surveys

Regarding online educational resources, a 2013 survey shows that a large percentage of teachers use the Internet to get information and to prepare teaching (Digital Europe Association, 2013).

A study conducted on a sample of 3,847 parents from almost all counties of the country (73 percent of them from urban areas), during 3-7 May 2020, indicates a positive attitude of parents regarding online education and the implementation of digital tools in school: 71% of parents believe that the education system should be prepared in terms of digital education for exceptional situations (epidemics); 40% support online teaching combined with classroom teaching; 35% of parents surveyed believe that online teaching should be fully integrated into the educational process (SuperTeach, Open-I Research, 2020).

A survey on parents' perception of online education during the state of emergency addressed to parents conducted between April 29 and May 6, 2020 on 4852 parents, mostly from urban areas, showed that: regarding the way of distance learning, audio video platforms have the highest percentage (80.6%), followed by text messages (80%); 22.44% consider distance learning to be effective, only 8.86% consider it to be very effective; 26.73% consider audio-video platforms efficient for distance learning; 30.87% consider the Telescoala program to be of very low quality; 80.1% of parents consider that online education cannot replace face-to-face education, although 19.9% consider that it could replace classical education (FNAP-IP, 2020, pp. 1, 3, 4, 7, 8).

Regarding the social media experiences of parents and the phenomenon of sharenting, in a statistical report conducted in the United States on a national sample of parents, the data showed that: „most parents of young children (84% of mothers, 70% of fathers) report using social media”; 74% of parents who use social media know that other parents „shared too much information about a child on social media” (oversharenting); 51% of parents offered too much personal information that could eventually lead to finding out the child's location; 56% of parents gave embarrassing information about a child; 27% shared inappropriate photos of a child (University of Michigan Child Health Evaluation and Research (CHEAR) Unit, 2015).

The online survey "Parents, Privacy & Technology Use Report", from November 2015, conducted on a sample of 589 parents of children aged 6 to 17 years shows that of the parents who have a social networking account, „almost 20% share online information about the child,,, with

content that can be considered embarrassing in the future; one in ten parents shows that their own child has requested the removal of information posted online by the parent (Brosch, 2016, p. 226; Family Online Safety Institute, 2015, p. 22).

A survey conducted on 331 pairs of parent-child examinee children's and parents' visions, preferences and options about what parents share on social media about their children revealed that „parents and children are in agreement in their perception of how often and how much information parents share about their children on social media”, but „there is disagreement about the permission-seeking process”, as „children believe their parents should ask permission more than parents think they should” (Moser et al., 2017, pp. 5221-5225).

The child's private life is exposed by parents and teachers by sharing images and other data, without the child's permission. There are surveys (sample of 935 boys and girls aged 9-17, study conducted between March and April 2018) that have shown that: about three out of ten children say that friends and parents have published information about them on the internet without first asking for consent; 23% of children show emotional discomfort caused by the exposure of information by parents online, 21% identify unpleasant consequences caused by parental posts; regarding the unauthorized distribution of the child's personal data by teachers, 17% of the sample show that teachers posted information about them without prior consent (Velicu et al., 2019, p. 56).

According to a study carried out during 2003, at European level on parents' level of knowledge on protecting children from illegal and harmful content on the Internet, 47% of parents in the sample indicated that they did not need more information in this regard, 44% of parents do not know where to report illegal or harmful content on the Internet, 33% clearly recognize it, and another 11% did not answer the question (European Opinion Research Group E.E.I.G., 2004, p. 33).

Sharenting was a worrying phenomenon even before the COVID-19 pandemic, from the indicated statistics it results on the one hand that parents do not understand the negative consequences it can have on the rights of the child and on his development and do not understand that they are responsible for protecting life, privacy, intimacy, children's own image. Surveys during the school suspension period during the pandemic regarding parents' perception of online education indicate (beyond the fact that it was necessary for everyone to accept the situation and adapt to the online learning process) indicates the acceptance of the idea of school education online, but without replacing the classic method. However, the overlapping

consequences of sharenting over the period when online education took place online, when parents and teachers used social media platforms and requested and shared images of children in the online learning process, without fully understanding that they are directly responsible protection of children's rights will have negative consequences for children's development and their rights, including their online identity.

4. Conclusions

Considering the aspects related to the negative evolution of sharenting highlighted in the literature, as observations that we totally agree, that „children have little to no recourse against parental oversharing”, and „they might lack opportunity to express their feelings, such as embarrassment, anger, or might lack an understanding of the implications of their parents' online conduct” (Steinberg, 2017, pp. 842-868), we notice a tendency of exacerbation of negative behaviors of parents associated with the phenomenon of sharenting, apparently and falsely encouraged by the permissiveness given by the pandemic context and the way the authorities managed (insufficiently clear in terms of protecting children's rights, beyond the right to education) moving to an online learning process for children.

As for „the legal argument that the state, in acting as *parens patriae*, should step in and enjoin parents from posting anything potentially revealing about children”, it is considered it would „fail as unreasonable restraint against speech”; „parent's online disclosure could be limited only in the extreme cases that put a child's at risk” (Steinberg, 2017, p. 873). The European Union's recognition of an individual's „right to be forgotten” recognizes that as time passes, the value of the disclosure is minimized” and allows parents to talk about their children on social media, but parents should be mindful that their intended audience might not always act with good intention (Steinberg, 2017, pp. 876, 880). „Parents must consider the negative effect sharing has on a child's psychological development” because the child will believe that sharing personal details about their lives is appropriate, even if (over)sharing might affect child's reputation later in life (Steinberg, 2017, p. 882). In this direction, we notice a tendency to accentuate, in a negative sense, some behaviors of parents who, involuntarily, without a proper legal education and without being aware of the implications, expose their children to social media without precedent. What is worse is that this exposure receives, in a misinterpreted way, the apparent support from the institutions responsible for the learning process, which manages the forced transition to an online learning process. The lack of a clear direction from the authorities for the online learning process, in

accordance with children's rights, contributes, as a close link, to parents' perception that children's exposure on social media is a natural component of life today, in a pandemic context.

Specialists consider that by bringing children and their interests into the privacy discourse, we are protecting children (Blecher-Prigat, 2020, p. 380). The amplification of the sharenting phenomenon in a pandemic context and in the context of online education overlaps and is determined by the lack of a proper legal education for teachers, parents and children, the lack of guidelines on how the online education process should take place, for the protection of children's rights to privacy, intimacy, children's own image, the simple formal involvement of state institutions that should have concerns for respecting children's rights, lack of education for parents on the limits of their right to expression, lack of awareness of the risks to which children are exposed in social media.

Through sharenting, ie by the distribution by parents of images and information about their own children, sometimes associated with the online sharing of images of children by parents and teachers in the online school educational process during the pandemic, the child's private life is exposed. Although they have the right to free expression, parents must be responsible and informed and act in the best interests of the child, as this initiates a digital life of the child who will be part of his digital identity. The child's right to privacy online must be respected; the right of children to address the courts in case of violation by parents, respectively teachers, of the right to privacy and to their own image is admitted. There are problems with the fact that there is no control over the information and images of children transmitted on the Internet by parents after their sharing, and the transmission online can negatively affect the child's further development, having a negative emotional impact on him.

The education of children must be carried out in the spirit of democratic values and the measures taken for the protection of minors must focus on the physical, mental and moral development of minors. There is a link between sharenting and the development of the online learning process during the suspension of the face-to-face education process due to the pandemic: sharenting could be amplified by the fact that parents could understand using teachers' requirements to share pictures and videos of children doing homework / learning activities as a justification for sharing even more information and pictures of children. However, both in the process of online school education and on the limits on the images shared by parents on social media, parents are responsible for protecting the child's right to education, the right to privacy, and the right to the own image of the

child; parents should use social media safely for the child in the online school education process and be aware of the risks to the safety and development of children. Likewise teachers, as actors involved in the online learning process, become responsible for it, although there is no training for them to understand the limits of the online school education process to ensure respect for the rights of the children involved.

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