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*Advantages and disadvantages of distance learning  
during COVID-19 pandemic from the perspective of teachers<sup>2</sup>*

ABSTRACT

The paper focuses on distance learning introduced in Poland since the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic was officially declared. In order to investigate the conditions of remote teaching, namely its advantages and disadvantages, 50 teachers were individually interviewed using remote communication tools (Skype, Zoom, etc.). As a result of the data analysis, the categories that determine success and failure of remote learning were identified, in regard to the work of teachers and their evaluation of the effectiveness of this form of education. The final conclusions present some recommendations regarding teacher training in online teaching.

KEYWORDS: Teacher, Remote learning, Pandemic

*Theoretical assumptions*

The outbreak of the pandemic resulted in different crises, difficulties or even traumas that societies in different countries had to face. These experiences have affected various areas of human life, oftentimes forcing emergency responses to adjust to the changes and deal with the unusual circumstances. The outbreak forced individuals and institutions to re-evaluate their priorities and introduce some instant actions to mitigate the consequences of the pandemic. School managers, teachers and students found themselves in an unprecedented

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<sup>2</sup> The research was carried out as part of the project: *The specificity of work in the perspective of pedagogical competences of teachers and graduates of teaching studies at their professional start* (BN.610-87/PBU/2020)

situation. Almost overnight, they had to implement remote learning in the system which was completely unprepared to it. Events connected with the implementation of this type of learning open a wide area of reflection upon education, especially during recent difficult or traumatic circumstances. According to the definition, the nature of traumatic experiences originates from the fact that persons who face certain events are not able to react to them in the psychological sense, which may result in a destructive impact on the psychological structures of these individuals<sup>3</sup>. In social sciences trauma is defined as experiencing a situation where the traumatogenic change causes conscious fear, discomfort, deprivation or dissatisfaction, for which the individuals who experience them blame the changing living conditions. Traumatogenic situations can be characterized by the following factors: rapidness, fast rate, short time, surprise, shock, unpredictability, and the way they are experienced depends on individual traits such as self-evaluation or the sense of deprivation. They may affect various areas of life. Their emergency character may result in serious consequences for the functioning and life of an individual<sup>4</sup>.

As already mentioned, the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic became a traumatic experience for many individuals. All people found themselves in a unique situation. The societies faced mass social distancing, the functioning of institutions was limited, new guidelines and restrictions were imposed almost overnight. The culture of fear began to dominate, people were anxious about their lives, jobs, education, health etc. Numerous institutions were closed: schools, kindergartens, universities, offices, theatres, cinemas, museums etc. Access to medical services was limited. The world got reduced to four walls and social relations have become a threat to individual life and health. The new reality forced people to move their daily activities to virtual environment. A mass use of the modern technologies began. The real world moved online and social relations got limited to the closest family members living under the same roof.

In the recent months, the reality based on the culture of fear and restrictions has become the reality for children, youth and adults. Ordered everyday life has been disturbed and replaced with virtual reality. Within days, school became virtual too. Teachers, students and parents had to find themselves in this new reality. Suddenly, the forms of work and the way relationships were built changed. Education during the pandemic has brought new challenges for school managers and teachers. On the one hand, it has offered new, better opportunities to students. On the other hand, it has posed a huge threat of unequal access to or even exclusion from education. The success of online learning has been determined by the financial and socio-cultural status of students. Remote learning evoked a whole range of emotions. Conversations with parents

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<sup>3</sup> P. NOVICK, *The Holocaust and Collective Memory. The American Experience*, Bloomsbury, London, 2011.

<sup>4</sup> A. RADZIEWICZ-WINNICKI, *Traumatogenne skutki asynchronizacji rozwoju społecznego w Polsce doby transformacji*, in R. KWIECIŃSKA, J. M. ŁUKASIK, (eds.), *Zmiana społeczna. Edukacja - polityka oświatowa - kultura*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe UP, Kraków, 2012.

and students, and online posts stimulate reflection and attempts to answer the question: «Are we ready for distance learning?»<sup>5</sup>.

In fact, remote learning has been in the area of interests of education specialists for years. Using modern technologies in teaching is part of university curricula. One of the conditions to obtain subsequent degrees of professional promotion in teaching is the use of new technologies. Therefore, many teachers participate in professional trainings in this area. There are also many free and paid software, tools and platforms to support teaching and learning. Thus, the outbreak of the pandemic should not have created any obstacles for teachers as they had to switch to remote teaching. One can say, it even allowed both teachers and students to use their didactic and IT competencies to the full. It also provided the opportunity to test various available tools for teaching and learning in times of social distancing. However, the reality showed that teachers could not change their didactic habits (schematic and routine actions). They failed to use online tools to design interesting forms of work for their students<sup>6</sup>. They did not open to innovations and had problems with designing an effective remote learning process. But the ability of the teaching staff to organize remote learning is, apart from the technical literacy of students and teachers and educational resources, one of the determinants of effective distance education<sup>7</sup>. Technical circumstances (poor bandwidth, lack of proper hardware) are beyond teachers' influence. But they can use many free educational software and platforms. Thus, one can say that the financial condition of schools is not the main barrier to the implementation of remote learning. Educational resources are not the barrier either (there are many open-access tools and materials). Therefore, the greatest barrier to implementing online education was the ability of the teachers to organize distance learning. The study by Koludo indicates that the most frequently chosen methods of work were webinars or referring students to a certain source. Teachers transferred the traditional model of education, rooted in the didactic principles formed by J. F. Herbart, to the Internet. They did not use online resources, nor did they encourage students to discuss, reflect, share their opinions or solve problems individually. They moved the traditional teaching into the virtual reality<sup>8</sup>. It is the methodological routine of teachers: one-way teaching which does not work in case of remote learning, which focuses on independent student work, that was the reason of failure of online education. Thus, teachers need empowerment in this particular area<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> A. KOLUDO, *Strategie kształcenia na odległość*, in J. PYŻALSKI (ed.), *Edukacja w czasach pandemii wirusa COVID-19. Z dystansem o tym, co robimy obecnie jako nauczyciele*, EduAkcja, Warszawa, 2020, p. 43.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 43-44.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.

<sup>9</sup> A. DOUCET, D. NETOLICKY, K. TIMMERS, G.J. TUSCANO, *Thinking about Pedagogy in an Unfolding Pandemic. An Independent report on approaches to distance learning during the COVID19 school closures. Report written by Armand Doucet, Dr. Deborah Netolicky, Koen Timmers and Francis Jim Tusciano to inform the work of Education International and UNESCO*, Paris, 2020, <<https://issuu.com/educa->

This paper focuses on the experiences of young teachers (up to 10 years of professional career) during social distancing time. The goal of the text is to describe and identify the main pedagogical experiences/categories which refer to the advantages of work in the virtual space during the pandemic and the disadvantages which were considered traumatogenic (sudden event, inability to deal with it, emotional dilemmas, reorganisation of life and work, double trauma: being unable to meet relatives and friends, remodelling family life and personal life).

### *Methodological assumptions*

During the COVID-19 pandemic it was concluded that the particular focus should be on the issues regarding identification of those areas of knowledge and skills among the teachers which need to be strengthened and improved. The situation of the pandemic inspired the discussion regarding online teaching. Due to the paper limitations, the results of the studies into positive and negative aspects of teaching in the virtual environment using modern technologies are presented very briefly and partially.

The goal of the research was to explore and identify the categories which describe the positive and negative aspects of remote learning during the pandemic from the perspective of teachers. The main research problem was formulated as follows: 'What are the advantages and disadvantages of distance learning during COVID-19 pandemic from the perspective of teachers?'

In order to obtain the research material, the method of qualitative interview was used as it is the best way to present experiences and definitions of a person, a group or an organization, as they are interpreted by this person, group or organization<sup>10</sup>.

The study was conducted among 50 female teachers working in primary schools and kindergartens in Southern Poland, who had been professionally active for no longer than 10 years. The respondents were selected according to the above-mentioned criteria, mainly because it was assumed that the youngest teachers are the best prepared to deliver online classes but they may have some difficulties regarding the didactic and educational activities. Their positive experiences and difficulties will be used to improve the process of professional training and identify the scope, forms and methods of vocational development and improvement.

Due to the qualitative research approach adopted, the empirical part does not contain any conclusions or thesis about any social trends. Thus, the results are fragmented and can be applied mainly to the teachers-respondents.

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tioninternational/docs/2020\_research\_covid-19\_eng> (access: 23.05.2020)

<sup>10</sup> N.K. DENZIN, Y.S. LINCOLN, *Metody badań jakościowych*, PWN, Warszawa, 2009, p. 73.

*Advantages and disadvantages of online teaching in the light of experiences of young teachers*

For many teachers, the situation of coronavirus pandemic resulted in traumatic experiences. Helplessness when facing new circumstances and events, inability to re-formulate life and use the obtained psychological, IT and didactic knowledge often exacerbated the trauma of the pandemic everyday reality, even though many people saw positive aspects of these difficult experiences. Oftentimes, teachers experienced extreme emotions as they tried to combine their personal life and the new phenomena such as working in the virtual environment or relationships with their loved ones. Despite numerous personal tensions and confusions, teachers pointed to both strengths and weaknesses of online learning. During the content analysis, the main categories were identified. They are presented in Figures 1 and 2.



Figure 1. *Categories related to advantages of online learning*  
 Source: Authors' own research

When speaking about the advantages of distance learning, teachers focused mainly on the following leading categories: economy and health at work, organizational and administrative work, educational activities, didactic competencies, pedagogical competencies, social relationships, personal development

and professional development. It should be emphasized that the above listed categories (both regarding advantages and disadvantages of education during the pandemic) were mentioned in the interviews with different emotional, time and interpretation intensity. As for time savings, the teachers emphasized that: they can save time because they do not commute to work and this translates into the quality and ability to function and organize family life (better organization of family life, more time with family at home). Teachers pointed out that they could choose when to work and find an adequate and comfortable place without leaving home. They also mentioned work hygiene, in particular they emphasized the aspects of daily rhythm like regular meals or bathroom visits, which is disturbed during working hours at school. They also pointed out the favourable working conditions for themselves (lack of noise during breaks) and their students. Another advantage was the fact that remote work reduced the number of necessary documents and relieved them from organizing additional classes or participation in school trips. They stated that during the pandemic they have good conditions to focus on the development of their students. As for organizational activities, the teachers valued fixed daily rhythm, which was comfortable for them and their families, ability to work from any place at home and less work involving preparation of teaching aids. They also pointed out some good effects of distance learning on their educational work. These positive effects included: shy children being more open in the virtual space, more opportunities to analyse individual needs of every child, ability to observe development (collecting assignments or videos with children's work in individual files), personalization of assignments.

As advantages of distance learning, the interviewed teachers mentioned the ability to shape their didactic and pedagogical competencies. In case of didactic competencies, they pointed out that the pandemic gave them the opportunity to activate and practice (and develop) their IT competencies which before they had used only occasionally. Thanks to remote learning, they could apply them combined with their own creativity, which resulted in the quality of the lessons, materials and forms of communication with children/students/parents. As for pedagogical competencies, one person declared that the advantage was that they did not have to work with students with behaviour issues. Unfortunately, this reveals the respondent's lack of expertise and skills to work with students with special educational needs. Other teachers focused on other aspects of pedagogical competencies they could develop and/or reinforce. Many of the respondents emphasized that they managed to establish good cooperation with parents and engage whole families in completing interesting assignments during lockdown. They also pointed out that they were able to initiate, build and maintain good relations with their students. Online work allowed them to observe the family environment of their students and take supporting, informative or intervention actions when necessary. The advantages mentioned by the respondents included social relationships with fellow teachers. During lockdown, they could collaborate and exchange materials only with those colleagues they wanted to work

with. They also received support from them. Some respondents emphasized that in case of online education every teacher finally had to take responsibility for their own work – they could not have their work done by someone else or allow it to be mediocre because parents could see their work and the traces of the form and quality of it have remained in the virtual space. The teachers mentioned the developmental aspects of remote learning in regard to their professional and personal development. Professional development involved mainly acquisition of new IT and technical competencies. Some respondents noticed that they tended to reflect more on their work and its meaning and modified it to gain maximum effectiveness for their students and greater satisfaction for themselves. Isolation from the physical workplace also facilitated teachers' personal development. Thanks to time savings and re-organized daily schedules, they were able to find time to develop their hobbies as well as allowed themselves to feel tired and rest or to admit they struggled with something and needed to change their way of acting or thinking.



Figure 2. *Categories related to disadvantages of online learning*  
 Source: *Authors' own research*

As for the disadvantages of distance learning, the teachers listed: educational activities, didactic competencies, organizational work, motivation to work, so-

cial relationships, social prestige/opinion, health, economy and amount of work (Figure 2). In the context of educational work, which was the dominating category, the teachers felt the greatest discomfort when they could not help victims of domestic abuse (children would not tell about their situation because their parents are at home) and because students with special educational needs could not receive the necessary support (and, consequently, lacked the opportunities for development) they would otherwise receive in school. The respondents also expressed many concerns about the health of the students who spent most of their days in front of their computers. Lack of interactions with some students and parents, unequal access to computers, tools and classes – especially in large families where access to computer/laptop is limited – are other negative aspects of distance learning, on which teachers have no direct influence. The respondents also mentioned that remote learning was not very effective in case of pre-school children and did not provide opportunity to develop their full potential. Additional difficult experience was the lack of possibility to say goodbye to children who finished their pre-school education, to summarize and close several years of actual work with a kindergarten group. The respondents also revealed shortages in their didactic competencies, which were visible in lacking the ideas for online classes or failure to lead the classes during the pandemic (especially among the older teachers who cannot even use Word software – the respondents said older colleagues learned the basics of ITC and it took them most of the day to prepare and deliver their classes). They also mentioned they were afraid to discredit themselves as their lessons could be watched by someone with greater competencies, who would criticize their abilities to use multimedia in teaching. They feared that they had to learn how to design and deliver classes online because so far, their knowledge and skills in this area had not been used in such a scale and university courses had not prepared them to work in such conditions. In the area of organizational activities, the greatest obstacles were: inability to organize work at home, establish daily schedule (time for work, care for own children and their needs during online work), difficulty to find appropriate place at home, technical problems with the hardware and necessity to share the computer with other family members (who also worked or studied remotely). In addition, some respondents mentioned lack of ideas and competencies to design and develop online studying resources. Pre-school teachers emphasized disinformation after returning to offline work, lack of ministerial guidelines regarding work during the pandemic or preparing opinions about 6-year-olds without the possibility of real diagnosis. Some teachers identified difficulties in mandatory reports they had to write regarding their work and collaboration with parents. There were also respondents who pointed out that, due to insufficient IT competencies, their school managers had limited contact with teachers and the information flow was disturbed. For example, information was distributed as SMS – limited in form and content (instructions, commands, tasks etc.). Many teachers lacked motivation to work, which made distance learning even more difficult. Their



motivation was lowered by, for example, fear that they would not be able to meet the expectations of students, parents and school management or lack of information if and to what extent their materials were used by the students. For the young teachers, an additional demotivator was control, monitoring and attempts of the school management to limit free contacts with parents and abusing power by school directors who commanded them to prepare and/or lead classes for other teachers or to train them (older colleagues criticized it and were unwilling to participate in trainings, they also did not use new knowledge in their work). Unwillingness to work and lack of motivation resulted also from the lack of real, offline support in difficult professional and personal moments. In many cases, teachers associated lowered motivation with the prestige and social status of their profession. They expressed they were afraid their work would be compared to the work of other teachers and be the subject of negative social opinions which stigmatize teachers. They were also concerned with the increasing familiarity expressed by the parents, lack of distance and breaking the established limits and rules of cooperation. The issue of social relationships was strongly emphasized in the teachers' statements. The weakness of distance learning in the area of social regulations included missing contacts with students and friendly colleagues as well as fear that these bonds and relationships would disappear. Many respondents pointed out that they were neglecting relationships with their families, children and spouses because they were preparing to remote work and expressed fear that their social relationships may disappear. Apart from the above-mentioned psychosocial difficulties, the teachers also listed health-related problems such as headaches, back pains, sleeplessness due to extensive use of the computer and general stress caused by the pandemic and worrying about the future of their families and career. The disadvantages of distance learning included also economic aspects. The teachers mentioned financial consequences of the pandemic which prevented them from private tutoring (young teachers, whose income is very low, were at risk of not being able to earn their living). The respondents also said that many municipalities did not pay incentive benefits for class supervision and the lack of extra working hours or replacements significantly affected their financial situation. In addition, using private hardware, paying for the use of ICT tools and higher electricity bills additionally loaded the family budget but did not generate additional income. Young teachers also expressed their concerns about keeping their jobs should the pandemic last. Many of them think they might get fired. In the category of economic factors, many teachers also mentioned the amount of work required. They referred in particular to the fact that they spent much more time to prepare materials and remote classes, for which they did not receive any financial gratification.

## *Conclusions*

During the analysis, the categories describing the advantages and disadvantages of distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic were identified and thus, the main research problem has been solved. Among the strengths of distance learning, teachers focused mainly on the following categories: economy and health at work, organizational and administrative work, educational activities, didactic competencies, pedagogical competencies, social relationships, personal development and professional development. The disadvantages included: educational activities, didactic competencies, organizational and administrative work, motivation to work, social relationships, social prestige/opinion, health, economy and amount of work.

Even though some categories like: economy, organizational and administrative work, educational activities, didactic competencies or social relationships were associated with both advantages and disadvantages of distance learning, their meaning and scope of reference is completely different (what was shown and discussed in the previous parts of the paper). The analyses indicate that young teachers were motivated to perform their educational and didactic responsibilities during social distancing, use their digital literacy in a creative way and further improve their competencies in this area. However, they also experienced fear, anxiety and intense stress. The most stressful was their psychosocial functioning in the new social reality: being locked at home with their families on the one hand, and on the other hand moving their work and relationships to the virtual space. A combination of these two worlds (social distancing vs. unlimited virtual contacts) was difficult even for the young teachers whose level of digital literacy (knowledge and skills obtained during university education) and ability to navigate the virtual space (they grew up in both social and virtual environments since early stages of their education) is much higher than older teachers.

According to the analyses performed, the particular focus should be on strengthening the competencies which facilitate collaboration and teamwork<sup>11</sup> and related communication competencies, as well as pragmatic competencies (reflected in organization and planning). Other competencies that must be improved – mainly among the older teachers – are digital literacy, didactic skills and related creative-critical and interpretation competencies (revealing as the ability to understand and define new phenomena, take adequate and non-standard actions which break stereotypes and routine)<sup>12</sup>. Also, the abilities

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<sup>11</sup> J. PAPIESKA, *Children's and Teachers' Social Competence in the Context of Teacher Education*, in J. MADALIŃSKA- MICHALAK, H. NIEMI, S. CHONG (eds.), *Research, Policy, and Practice in Teacher Education in Europe*, Wydawnictwo UŁ, Łódź, 2012.

<sup>12</sup> J. ŁUKASIK, K. JAGIELSKA, A. MRÓZ, A. DUDA, P. KOPERNA, K. SOBIESZCZAŃSKA, *The new model of teacher education in Poland: the directions of changes in the context of the existing research and teaching practices*, in L. GOMES CHOVA, A. LOPEZ MARTINEZ, I. CANDEL TORRES I. (eds.), *ICERI 2019: conference proceedings: 12th annual International Conference of Education, Research and Innovation*,

to cope with stress, relieve emotional tension and overcoming fears should be reinforced – these are skills within the psychological-pedagogical competencies<sup>13</sup>. They are particularly important for both comfort of work and maintaining psychical balance during the pandemic. Lack of these conditions may even result in depression. In addition, these skills will empower teachers so that they will be able to provide proper support for their students who, like them, suffer huge social and psycho-emotional losses due to social distancing.

During the analyses, the authors also tried to identify the sources of satisfaction and difficulties experienced while performing professional work online during social distancing time. The analyses indicated the following sources of satisfaction and motivation to work and social life: family relationships, relations with the students and their parents, development observed in own children and students, satisfaction from well delivered online classes reinforced with positive feedback from the students and their parents. The sources of difficulties were most often found in the pandemic itself, as it was the reason for restricted social contacts, isolation, uncertainty and concerns about life and health of the loved ones. Another source of difficulties was the workplace, especially poor management in the crisis situation, which increased uncertainty, disinformation, and facilitated the use of status and power to, for example, force teachers to lead or prepare classes for their colleagues. The sources of difficulties related to the family environment most often involved living and working conditions, that is, organization of work, access to the computer and the necessity to care for own children. The economic factors referred to difficult financial and material situation (lower income, higher utility bills, lack of possibility to buy additional hardware for other family members who had to use the computer).

Faced with the necessity to provide online teaching and, at the same time, sticking to routinely re-produced daily educational practices, most of the respondents implemented the Herbart's model of teaching which did not work. Instead, they struggled with frustration, anxiety or terror, fearing that students and parents would discover they lacked knowledge and abilities to work with modern technologies. Thus, recognizing and describing the advantages and disadvantages of education during the pandemic, as well as identifying the sources of satisfaction and difficulties experienced in work and daily life will allow to reinforce the specific teaching competencies. This, in turn, will minimize anxiety among the teachers and enable effective actions to be implemented both in professional work (including its virtual or hybrid form) and private life.

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(Seville, Spain, 11-13 November 2019), IATED Academy, Seville, 2019, pp. 1296-1302; J. ŁUKASIK, K. JAGIELSKA, A. MRÓZ, A. DUDA, P. KOPERNA, K. SOBIESZCZAŃSKA, *Teachers at the beginning of their professional work-assessment of the level of pedagogical competence of graduates of teaching faculties*, in U. COMITE et al., *1st International Conference on Contemporary Education and Economic Development (CEED 2018)*, Atlantis Press, Paris, 2018, pp. 127-133.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

Therefore, one of the important challenges for education (training and professional development) of teachers, especially those who have many years of professional experience, is to develop the skills which enable understanding of digital media, improve digital literacy and reinforce coping strategies used to deal with stressful and adverse situations (traumatic experience prevention). For sure, to function in a world of rapid changes and increasingly unpredictable situations (which require instant solutions and implementation of new methods), modern teachers need knowledge, reflection and critical approach<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> J. MADALIŃSKA-MICHALAK, H. NIEMI, S. CHONG, *Trends and Themes in Teacher Education. Research, Policy and Practice*, in J. MADA-LIŃSKA-MICHALAK, H. NIEMI, S. CHONG (eds.), *Research, Policy, and Practice in Teacher Education in Europe*, Wydawnictwo UE, Łódź, 2012.

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