

DOI: 10.28934/jwee20.34.pp41-58

ORIGINAL SCIENTIFIC PAPER

The Impact of COVID-19 Pandemics on Schools – Challenges and New Opportunities for a Woman-Owned Organization



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ABSTRACT

The world-wide COVID-19 pandemic situation has had a significant impact on the everyday work of organizations, including private educational institutions. In the proposed study, the authors focus on how a private school providing pre-primary, primary, and secondary education has faced the biggest challenges of these times - 1) in compliance with its mission, to provide children and youth with high quality education regardless the circumstances; 2) to take advantage of the situation, i.e. to find the best possible alternatives and so, be one step ahead of its competitors; and 3) as being partially dependent on school fees, not to lose paying customers. After a thorough consideration of alternatives, the school – as one of few in Slovakia – opted for offering the whole educational program online only several days after all schools were closed in the country.

The purpose of the study is to provide an example of good practice for other – not only woman-owned – organizations and to support the real efficiency of the applied approach by relevant data. The authors of the study carried out a

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questionnaire survey with the school's students, the students' parents, and the whole teaching staff, focusing on their overall satisfaction with the realized online education, their experiences and opinions, as well as their attitudes towards e-learning in secondary schools in general. The questionnaire survey was a part of a larger research focusing on distance learning strategies applied during school closures in Slovakia. In the study, topic relevant research findings are presented, which indicate that the pandemic has not had a negative impact on this particular educational institution and this woman-owned business has even found new opportunities for its future work

KEY WORDS: *woman-owned organization, COVID-19, private school, school closure, online learning, streaming*

Introduction

In 2020, the new COVID-19 coronavirus has represented an unprecedented challenge for educational systems worldwide. In March 2020, to prevent the spread of respiratory diseases caused by COVID-19, governments reacted to the situation by massive school closures. In most countries, all educational institutions were closed for a certain period of time and these measures negatively affected 90% of the learners' population on all levels of education, including lifelong learners (UNESCO, 2020b,c). There were also countries, in which schools were closed locally, which means extra millions of learners who could not attend schools or other educational institutions. In April 2020, when the number of closed schools was the highest, education in 195 countries was interrupted. Such a situation in education can have a long-term effect on the society from the aspect of the availability of human resources in the future (The World Bank, 2020), which is one of the reasons for supporting distance learning (not only) in the times of crisis.

Distance Learning Solutions During School Closures

As a reaction to the new situation, with the aim to ensure the continuity of students' education, schools started to apply various forms of distance learning. Where it was possible, they introduced technology supported learning, but many schools had to face several problems related to their learners' connectedness. So, as a consequence, the pandemic has brought new dimensions of exclusion (UNESCO, 2020c) – distance learning was not

accessible for everyone. Despite the attempts to provide learners with a wide range of alternatives, schools were not able to reach as many as 500 million students worldwide (Giannini, 2020).

There were differences between countries in the applied strategies for education during school closures on national levels. In less developed countries, radio and TV broadcasting were used, but not every student had access to them. In more developed countries, the trend was to use digital technologies for educational purposes as much as possible, but certain groups of students (especially the socially disadvantaged ones) could not connect, even though in most families there was at least one smartphone which could be used for online learning. In these families, there were usually more children in one household and also internet access was problematic (Bell et al., 2020). Therefore, in the case of every single school, the situation of the institution and the specifics of students had to be thoroughly considered in order to provide students, regardless their backgrounds, with equal opportunities to learn.

When it came to school closures, schools had to face a new task – to modify or completely change the forms and methods of teaching they were used to apply and to seek new, effective alternatives, which could find their application under the new circumstances. It was a great help for schools when companies such as Microsoft or Google made their applications available to schools for distance learning and provided them, their teachers and their students with user support (Di Pietro, 2020).

The above described non-standard conditions created space for identifying the opportunities and limits of distance learning and online learning in the direct educational practice in primary and secondary schools, which, compared with higher education institutions, are less frequently mentioned in the context of replacing school based education by various forms of distance learning (Radović -Marković, Živanović, 2019).

School Closures in Slovakia

In Slovakia, the first COVID-19 positive patient was recorded on March 6, 2020. When new cases started to occur, restrictive measure were introduced in order to prevent the spread of respiratory diseases caused by the new coronavirus. One of them was the decision by the Ministry of Education, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic, based on which all schools and school facilities were closed on March 16, 2020. That decision affected

almost 1 million learners from all age groups, including more than 480.000 primary school and 215.000 secondary school students (CVTI SR, 2020). Schools had not been prepared for such measures and not even the ministry of education had a clear vision on how to ensure education for an unpredictably long period of time. Slovakia with no previous experiences with any kind of crisis situation, did not have a plan, and therefore, the government's and the ministry of education's reactions were slow, they were not able to react to the new circumstances flexibly and provide schools with sufficient support and guidance. Another factor having impact on the situation was the unpreparedness of the educational system for the introduction of distance learning. According to UNESCO (2020a), preparedness for distance education is determined by the following factors: a) preparedness in the field of digital technologies (electricity, technical devices, internet access, etc.); b) preparedness of content (educational resources); c) preparedness of teachers (digital competencies, skills for designing content and working online), and family support (favorable conditions for learning in households); d) preparedness for monitoring and evaluating the processes (monitoring accessibility, students' work, providing feedback, etc.) and as experiences have shown, Slovakia, similarly to many other countries, was not sufficiently prepared. Certain shortcomings can still be observed in the following fields: a) the digital infrastructure is not satisfying, there are huge differences in its accessibility between schools, teachers and students; b) a big share of the teaching materials made available during the crisis has still not been verified in the teaching practice; c) the existing storages of educational content must be improved to make access and filtering simpler; d) students' access to online education varies – equality is not ensured for students from disadvantaged social backgrounds (Cedefop, 2020). So, schools in Slovakia found themselves in a situation when they had to make risky decisions, to take over the responsibility, but there are many examples from practice when the teacher was the decisive factor from the aspect of ensuring continuity of education as well as promoting students' learning process in their home environments. There was a range of alternative approaches that schools or individual teachers – based on the specifics of their students and on their conditions – selected from: a) e-mailing students handouts; b) individual communication with students; c) online instruction; d) their combination.

The first five grades of elementary schools in Slovakia were reopened on June 1, 2020. As for other educational institutions, they could start teaching on June 23, 2020, just 7 working days prior to summer holidays. For students,

going to school was not compulsory, they could continue in distance learning as well.

COVID-19 Pandemics from the Point of View of a Private Educational Institution

There are debates on whether educational institutions can or cannot be considered businesses, but despite their specifics or the fact that most of them are non-profit organizations and being such, they do not generate profit, in order to survive on the educational market, they must behave like any other enterprise. They provide services (education) to their customers (students and their parents) (Are schools businesses?, 2017).

The authors of the paper carried out a survey in a private educational institution (kindergarten, primary school, and secondary grammar school) in Bratislava which is run as a woman-owned business. The fact that the owner of the school is a woman, as well as the headmaster, the deputy-headmaster of the school, and six out of eight heads of departments are women, plays an important role from the aspect of the customers' (parents') trust in the institution and the innovations to be introduced. As research results on gender differences between male and female leaders show (Caliper, 2005), women in general possess several qualities that can be considered advantages in school management. They are more persuasive when discussing educational issues with parents as they are stronger in interpersonal skill, they bring their experience (including motherhood) into school management, are more emphatic and engaging of others, so, parents are more likely to believe that they will do their best for the good of students. Women show more willingness to listen to others, to take in information from all sides and only after that they select the best possible solution from the available alternatives. They also have qualities which have an important role to play in crisis situations – Caliper's findings say that, if compared with men – they are more flexible, more willing to take risk and bring innovative solutions.

After the first cases of respiratory diseases caused by COVID-19 were detected, the founder (owner) of the school made attempts to keep the school functioning as long as possible in order to ensure quality education to students and not to get the students' parents – being the school's customers – into an unpleasant situation when they have to stay with their children at home or find someone to look after them. The President of the Bratislava Self-Governing Region closed all the schools founded by the Bratislava Self-

Governing region for five days on March 9, 2020. On March 10, 2020, taking into account the seriousness of the dramatically changing situation in the region and under the pressure the school found itself, the school participating in our survey was closed by its owner/founder as well. All schools and school facilities in the country were closed by the ministry of education on March 16, 2020.

As the owner of the school believed that after two weeks the students would come back to school, the school opted for the strategy to e-mail students or their parents' handouts and worksheets to be worked out by students for every subject once a week. All these materials contained tasks and exercises for revising what had been taught at school before it was closed. The original idea was that the school's students would learn new educational content after school reopening as the school did not want to burden the students' parents who were in a difficult and uncertain situation anyway. Only students who were supposed to take school leaving exams in May continued in regular consultations with teachers via Skype or WhatsApp immediately.

There were several factors which had an impact on the process of the selection of the most suitable alternative among the available ones. The first one was the necessity to apply a pro-customer approach and not to transfer the responsibility for students' education to parents. There were parents who simply could not stay at home with their children during the day as they had to go to work and another group of them worked from home, so, for them, it would be extremely difficult to teach their children at home. Another important factor, which was considered, was the question of students' connectedness. Having in mind the fact that being a private school student and paying school fees means that there were no socially disadvantaged students in the school, the students' internet access was evaluated as satisfactory. So, naturally, the school opted for online education, more particularly live-streaming lessons.

After negotiations with a private company, the school was selected for a pilot programme where Microsoft Teams was used for the purposes of distance education in the school. In the first phase, Microsoft trained two teachers from the school for working in the application. The two trained teachers generated accounts for all students and teachers and were responsible for the technical aspects of online education. They also run an initial training session for their colleagues who also attended online courses organized by Microsoft. Teachers could take home the technology and teaching aids they needed from school and the data they used at home were paid by the school

as well. For students' parents, the school opened for certain hours to give them an opportunity to take their children's textbooks home.

On March 25, 2020, teachers started to teach online from their homes based on a timetable adjusted to online learning. During the first three days, the whole system was tested with satisfying results. Taking part in online education was not obligatory, but as experiences show, for parents, it represented an acceptable and comfortable solution and even though there was a few days' delay in several cases, all students joined the online lessons. So, students were provided with equal opportunities to learn. Primary school pupils started with three lessons a day while secondary school students had 4 lessons. From the following week onwards, all school subjects were covered and the teachers also provided students with individual consultations on demand. Everything was managed to be able to finish the school year without any difficulties as for the covered educational content or students' assessment.

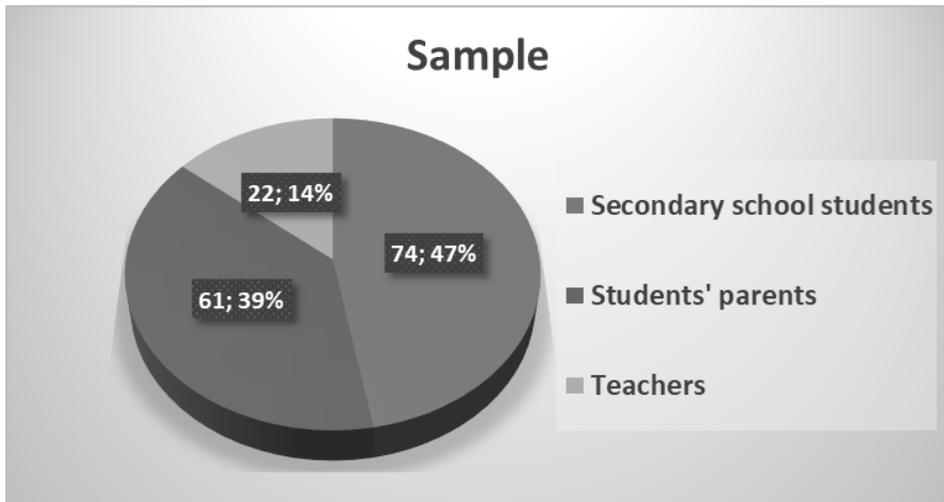
Teacher – parent communication as well as staff meetings were carried out online – e-mails, EduPage and Microsoft Teams were used.

After school reopening in Slovakia, the school did not record a big interest of students or their parents in going back to school. Many of them were still afraid of becoming infected and others did not see a sense in sending their children to school just a few days before the school year ends. Therefore, lessons were streamed from the classroom to ensure the same quality of education both for students in the classroom and those staying at home.

Teacher, Student and Parent Satisfaction Survey

As a part of a larger research on the applied distance learning strategies in Slovakia and the new opportunities that the introduction of the online learning option can bring for secondary education, being carried out by the authors of the paper, a satisfaction survey was conducted in the presented private school. The questionnaire survey was focused on the stakeholders' satisfaction with the realization of online learning between March 25 and May 31, 2020, i.e. almost the whole period when school based education was interrupted in Slovakia. Bellow, only the partial results of the survey, relevant to the scope of the paper, are presented.

The sample consisted of 22 teachers, 74 secondary grammar school students, and 61 parents of secondary school students.

Figure 1: Sample

Source: own research

For the purposes of the survey, four questionnaires were designed – a questionnaire for teachers, a questionnaire for secondary grammar school students, a questionnaire for the parents of elementary school pupils and a questionnaire for secondary grammar school students' parents. In each of the questionnaires, both closed-ended and open-ended items were used with the aim to gather quantitative data but also gain information about the participants' experiencing, to get an insight into the factors influencing their attitudes, etc. In the case of each of the administered questionnaires, three scores and indexes were calculated – the respondents' satisfaction with the quality of online education, the respondents' satisfaction with the organization of online learning, and the respondents' satisfaction with the technical realization of online education. These scores and indexes were later used for further calculations and verification of research hypotheses.

In the context of the paper, especially the first calculated score for each group of respondents – satisfaction with the quality of online education – is important.

Students' Satisfaction with Online Education

The score for student satisfaction with the quality of online education was calculated based on the scores of five 5-point Likert scale items – yes (4),

rather yes (3), rather no (2), no (1), I do not know (0) – in the student questionnaire. In these items, the students were asked about the correctness of the school's decision to introduce online learning (*“Do you agree with the school's decision to introduce online education during school closures?”*), whether they liked learning online (*“Do you like learning online?”*), how satisfied they were with the lessons (*“Are you satisfied with the quality of online lessons?”*), whether their teachers can teach online (*“Do you think your teachers are good at teaching online?”*), and whether they understand topics presented online (*“If you compare learning in the classroom and learning online, are topics presented online clear enough for you?”*).

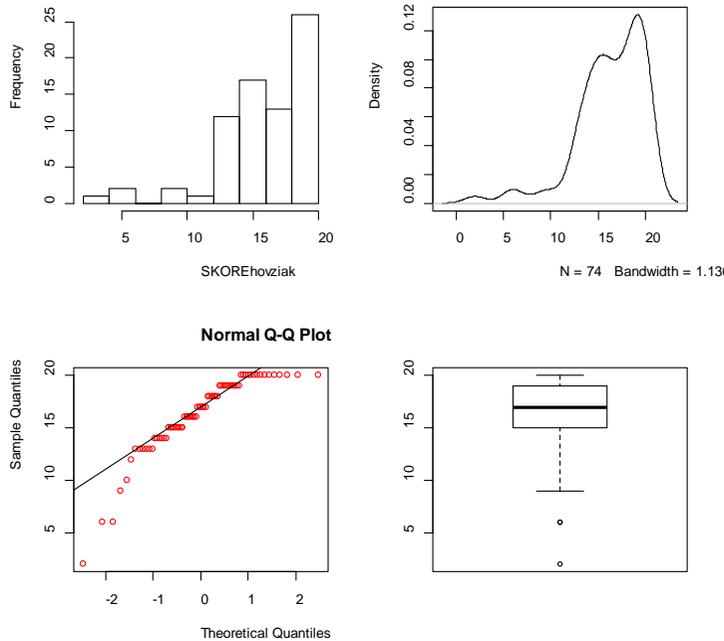
As the results show, students evaluated the quality of education in 5 items (possible maximum score = 20) positively – group average = 16.31 (81.55% of the possible maximum; standard deviation = 3.607; group mean = 16.86 (84.29% of the possible maximum) – which is illustrated in Figure 2. Gender differences between girls and boys were found in their evaluation of the quality of online education – boys were more satisfied (group average = 16.94; standard deviation = 3.140; group mean 17.50) than girls (group average = 15.86; standard deviation = 3.883; group mean 16.44). As the results of other research show, there are no significant differences between boys and girls in the time spent online – e.g. according to the findings of Smahel et al. (2020), boys in Slovakia spend online 144 minutes a day, while in the case of girls it is 146 minutes a day – and so, the causes must be searched for in other fields, e.g. the type of activities boys and girls do online, gender differences in their attitudes towards teachers, in their need for direct social contact, etc.

In opened-ended questions, we asked the students about things they liked and did not like during online education. Each of the 74 students in the sample provided at least one answer both for the positives and the negatives of online education. According to them, the pros of studying from home were:

- 1) comfort (21 students) – *“I have everything I need at home.”*; *“I don't have to get up as early as usual.”*; *“I can stay at home and learn.”*;
- 2) using digital technologies for learning (12 students) – *“Easier access to learning materials.”*; *“We could join the lessons from anywhere.”*; *“I liked online presentations.”*;
- 3) learning climate (10 students) – *“Teachers applied a better approach.”*; *“Our teachers made their best to make everything*

- clear to us.”; “There was a more relaxed atmosphere during the lessons.”;*
- 4) not interrupting learning (8 students) – *“We could study like under normal conditions.”; “We learned everything we would learn in the classroom.”;*
 - 5) timetable (8 students) – *“We had fewer lessons and we started later.”; “We had more time for doing homework and for other activities.”;*
 - 6) maintaining social contact (8 students) – *“During the lessons, I had an opportunity to see my teachers and schoolmates at least virtually.”; “We were in touch with our friends and teachers.”;*
 - 7) other (9 students).

Figure 2: The score for students' satisfaction with the quality of online education



Source: own research

There were also fields in which the participating students experienced some difficulties or were not satisfied with. We classified their answers into

six categories: 1. too much homework (21 students); 2. technical issues (12 students); 3. problems with understanding certain topics online (9 students); 4. behaviour issues (7 students); 5. timetable (4 students); and 6. other (26 students) – including answers which did not fit to any of the above categories and indifferent answers, such as “I do not know”, “nothing”, etc.

Parents’ Satisfaction with Online Education

In the case of the parent questionnaire, we applied the same approach as for the questionnaire for students. We calculated the score for parents’ satisfaction based on the scores for 6 items focusing on how satisfied they were with the quality of lessons (“*Are you satisfied with the quality of the educational process?*”); how satisfied their children were with online learning (“*Is your child satisfied with the quality of the educational process?*”), whether the respondents’ children had individual online consultations with their teachers (“*Have your child taken the opportunity for individual consultation with a teacher?*”); how they evaluate the teachers’ ability to teach online (“*Are you satisfied with your child’s teachers’ ability to teach online?*”); whether their children understood educational content presented online (“*Can your child understand educational content presented online?*”); and whether, in parents’ opinion, online education reduced the lack of social contact during the pandemics (“*Do you think that online education can partially reduce the lack of social contact with peers?*”). Based on the obtained data, we can assume that the students’ parents were satisfied with the quality of online education in spring 2020.

Bellow, we present the findings from the questionnaire for secondary grammar school students’ parents, i.e. the parents of students participating in our research.

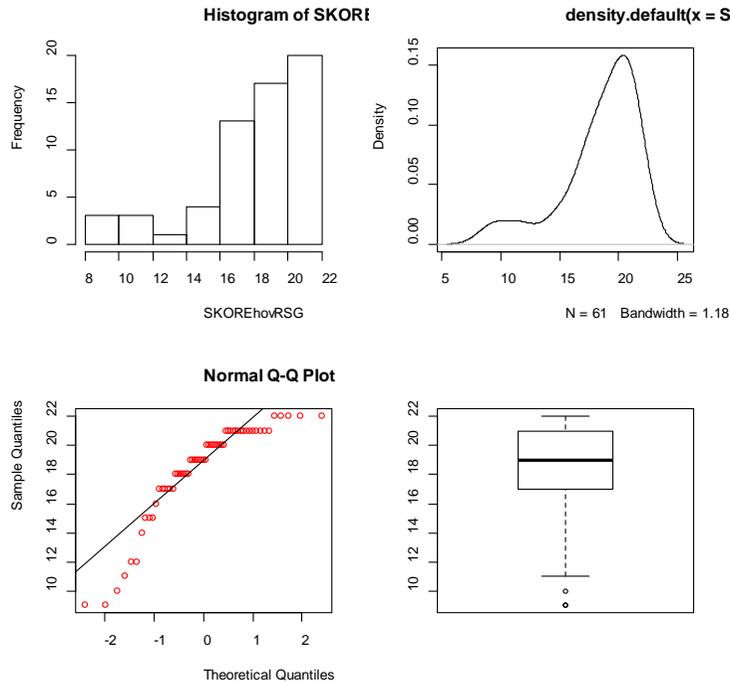
As Figure 3 shows, the scores calculated from 6 items (possible maximum = 24) were high enough to assume that the students’ parents showed satisfaction with the quality of the realized online education – group average = 18.41 (76.71% of the possible maximum); standard deviation = 3.288; group mean = 19.29 (80.39% of the possible maximum) – but, if the data obtained from students, parents and teachers are compared, it is clear that parents were the least satisfied with the quality of online education during pandemics. Based on their responses in the opened-ended items, it must also be pointed out that they were much more critical to certain aspects of the educational process during pandemics than their children. Several parents

provided more than one answer in both items. The students' parents listed the following benefits of online education during the pandemics:

- 1) continuity of education (22 parents) – *“Teachers explained new topics and we could work from home.”*; *“It is much better to have our children online than to work out worksheets with them every day.”*; *“Everything is almost like in the classroom.”*;
- 2) maintaining social contact (16 parents) – *“At least some socialization.”*; *“Students’ contact with their teachers and schoolmates.”*; *“Communication between peers.”*;
- 3) comfort (14 parents) – *“We saved a lot of time as we did not have to commute.”*; *“We spent more time together as a family.”*;
- 4) having a daily routine (6 parents) – *“I appreciate that children had a certain daily routine.”*;
- 5) timetable (6 parents) – *“More time for doing homework.”*; *“Fewer lessons and the same quality of education.”*;
- 6) students' engagement, independence, taking over responsibility (5 parents) – *“Students’ independence.”*; *“More opportunities for individual work.”*;
- 7) development of students' technical skills (4 parents) – *“Students learned to use a new application.”*; *“Students gained a better orientation in the online environment.”*
- 8) other (12 parents).

As mentioned above, despite their overall satisfaction, parents were critical about certain aspects of the realized online education. They were dissatisfied with: 1. technical issues (22 parents); 2. the lack of social contact (9 parents); 3. too much homework (7 parents); 4. the quality of lessons (6 parents); 5. the timetable (4 parents); 6. behavior issues (3 parents); 7. control and assessment (3 parents); 8. teachers' insufficient preparedness (3 parents); students' inability to adapt to the online environment (3 parents); other (14 parents – including indifferent answers).

Figure 3: The score for parents' satisfaction with the quality of online education



Source: own research

When evaluating the parents' responses, a certain degree of caution is necessary as it is difficult to find out whether they evaluated how the school handled the situation during the pandemics or the quality of education itself. The fact that the parents had an opportunity compare their experiences with the experiences of parents from other schools and see that they did not have to become their children's teachers has an important role to play. Therefore, it can be assumed, that they were satisfied with the school's and the school management's quick reaction and flexibility rather than with the quality of online education compared to classroom based learning.

Teachers' Satisfaction with Online Education

Our intention was to calculate the score for satisfaction with the quality of online education from the score of 8 items (possible maximum score = 32) – *“Have you provided your students with the opportunity for individual online*

consultations?”; “Do you think your students are prepared/mature enough to study online?”; “Do you think that educational content presented online can be equally understandable for students as educational content presented in the classroom?”; “Do you have a student not being able to learn working online?”; “Do you feel sufficiently prepared for teaching online in the future?”; “What kind of feedback have you received from your students?” (positive – rather positive – rather negative – negative – I do not know); “What kind of feedback have you received from your students’ parents?” (positive – rather positive – rather negative – negative – I do not know) – in teachers as well, but as the data below show, the participating teachers were unexpectedly positive in their subjective perception of the investigated issues. What was surprising, in the case of teachers, only positive (“yes” or “rather yes”/“positive” or “rather positive”) and indifferent (“I do not know”) answers were recorded.

Table 1: The score for teachers’ satisfaction with the quality of online education

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	20	3	13.6	13.6	13.6
	21	1	4.5	4.5	18.2
	22	6	27.3	27.3	45.5
	23	4	18.2	18.2	63.6
	24	5	22.7	22.7	86.4
	25	2	9.1	9.1	95.5
	26	1	4.5	4.5	100.0
	Total	22	100.0	100.0	

Source: own research

Therefore, instead of the score for satisfaction, the index of satisfaction was calculated – group average = 22.77 (71.16% of the possible maximum); standard deviation = 1.660; group mean = 22.80 (71.25% of the possible maximum).

Such high scores in teachers can be explained by the fact that, for most of them, online teaching was a completely new experience (68.2% of the participating teachers had no previous experiences with online learning or teaching and further 4.55% of teachers had no previous experiences with

teaching) and in such cases, individuals' subjective interpretation and experiencing of certain phenomena is more optimistic, even euphoric.

The benefits of online learning during the pandemics, as indicated by teachers, can be divided into the following categories:

- 1) development and innovations (9 teachers) – *“The digital competencies of both students and teachers were developed.”*; *“It was an opportunity to improve my teaching skills.”*; *“Application of a whole range of new teaching methods.”*;
- 2) maintaining social contact during pandemics (7 teachers) – *“We could communicate with our students.”*; *“Communication with my students and colleagues.”*;
- 3) ensuring continuity of education (7 teachers) – *“Students' education was not interrupted due to the quarantine.”*; *“Students did not lose their interest in education.”*;
- 4) effectiveness and flexibility (4 teachers) – *“Flexibility in time.”*; *“Highly effective lessons.”*; *“Online learning is a cost saving solution for all stakeholders.”*;
- 5) promotion of students' independence and responsibility (3 teachers) – *“Students had to take over the responsibility for their learning and time management.”*; *“Developing students' independence in learning.”*;
- 6) individualized approach (2 teachers) – *“We had more time for individual consultations.”*; *“I could apply a more individualized approach.”*
- 7) other (3 teachers).

Although being satisfied with the quality of education, the teachers listed several problems, they had to face when teaching online in the following fields: 1. technical issues (8 teachers); 2. behavior issues and problems with students' attention (7 teachers); 3. demanding and time-consuming lesson planning (5 teachers); 4. difficult control and assessment of students' work and performance (2 teachers); and 5. other (6 teachers) – including indifferent answers.

The participating teachers' responses are influenced by the fact that in several items, they performed self-evaluation and so, their responses might be a picture of how they perceive themselves and their work rather than the quality of lessons.

Discussion and Conclusions

Both the schools' experiences and the results of the survey show general satisfaction with the online learning programme introduced for the period when the schools were closed. It is a positive finding from several aspects. Firstly, the school managed the situation during the first wave of pandemics well, has a functioning system of distance learning, which means that it is ready to face the eventual second wave of pandemics or any other crisis situation which could lead to school closures. This information undoubtedly represents a big advantage on the educational market. Secondly, the school can build on the experiences and feedback on online education realized during the pandemics, take advantage of them and provide its customers with services which are not offered by many (if any) educational institutions in the country – e.g. allowing students who cannot be in the classroom due to a range of reasons (being sick, taking part in a competition abroad, etc.) join their schoolmates in the classroom via the Internet; provide individual online consultations for students online, do certain learning or extracurricular activities online, etc.

On the other hand, we must be careful and not to be too enthusiastic about the suitability of this form of online learning for secondary school students. We must have in mind that the online programme was not introduced under standard conditions and the fact that the stakeholders were satisfied with that solution during the crisis, does not necessarily mean that, if they were asked, they would opt for replacing traditional, classroom based education by online learning. But there is no reason for being skeptical, the two-and-a-half-month experience revealed the shortcomings of live-streaming lessons and the highlighted those things, which should be improved and then, online learning can be used even after the world goes back to normal.

To conclude, although the obtained results cannot be generalized to all schools or the whole population of secondary school students, the findings are useful from several aspects. It must be pointed out that the COVID-19 pandemics showed how unprepared educational systems worldwide, as well as individual schools, were for crisis situations. International organizations such as UNESCO, OECD, etc. call for examples of good practice, which should help national governments in crisis planning. The above presented educational institution can serve as an example of good practice for other schools, as the experiences supported by the obtained data show that online

learning in the presented form can, under specific conditions, be well applied in crisis situations in schools where all students have an opportunity to connect. The presented findings can also be perceived as a very good signal for the school and its owner as they have proved that they are flexible, innovative and are able to provide high quality education even under unfavourable circumstances.

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Article history: Received: 29 October, 2020

Accepted: 1 December, 2020