

Researching Education During a Pandemic

Special issue editorial

The current issue of the *Journal of Contemporary Educational Studies* continues the topic started with last December's thematic issue *Education during pandemic Covid-19*. This special issue presents the findings of 18 additional studies, in which authors demonstrate reveal, approaching from different angles and disciplines, how deep and far-reaching the consequences of the pandemic have been for education as well as educational research. All the studies examine the time of the spring wave of the pandemic.

The articles are grouped into four thematic sections. The first section is comprised of articles that address the issue of equal opportunities in the context of distance teaching, highlighting various aspects of the quality of such teaching and teaching in (post-)pandemic times. According to **Marjan Šimenc**'s article *The role of technology in education and equal opportunities for students in the Covid-19 crisis*, during school closure and the enforced use of technology, access to the internet suddenly and simultaneously meant access to education, and this became a fundamental issue of equal opportunities. The author analyses the concept of the digital divide and highlights its fairly narrow understanding in Slovenian educational policy and professional services. Referring to the classification of the attitudes of pedagogical staff towards educational technology, he advocates that in the future technology should become part of the teacher's routine, normalized and invisible, just like the use of any other educational materials and aids. Similarly, **Alenka Kepic Mohar** and **Miha Kovač**, in their article *Digital learning materials after pandemic as part of the school routine?*, maintain that teachers used to avoid digital educational materials before the pandemic. The authors present the findings of their analysis of two educational portals before and after the first wave of the epidemic. The analysis demonstrates that the use of digital materials in schools is not only a technological but also a pedagogical concern. It shows that the use of such materials is not yet pedagogically adequate. Thorough further research and teacher training will be required. The equality and quality of distance teaching are issues currently being addressed around the world, and it is a major challenge everywhere. As **Norina Bogatec**, **Sara Brezigar** and **Maja Mezgec** demonstrate, this is especially challenging in bilingual schools. In *Distance teaching in slovenian-medium and slovenian-italian bilingual primary schools in Italy during the Covid-19 epidemic*, they present the findings of the study involving the parents and teachers of the primary school children attending schools with Slovenian-language instruction in the provinces of Trieste and Gorizia in Italy and the multi-level school with Slovenian-Italian bilingual instruction. The implementation of distance teaching at these schools was difficult with regard to teaching methods, technical equipment

and the digital literacy of teachers, students and parents. However, the authors point out that the challenges that these schools had been facing for a long time became especially acute, particularly in the field of the language and inclusion of non-Slovenian-speaking children and parents. Students are also given voice in a study conducted by **Izabela Kochan** among secondary-school students in Poland. In her article *Distance learning in Polish secondary schools: Students' opinions during the Covid-19 pandemic*, the author uses anecdotal examples to show how big the decline in the quality of instruction and assessment was during the first school closure and how negative its effects were on equity, having deepened differences between students according to their socio-economic backgrounds. The deterioration of equity and quality in education did not only affect the education of children and young people, but also adult education and community learning in general. This is emphasized by two contributions from the field. In *Study on adult education during Covid-19 – experiences for the way forward*, **Tanja Možina**, **Sonja Klemenčič** and **Marko Radovan** present the findings of their study to determine how distance teaching was carried out in adult education organizations during the first wave of the pandemic. The findings show that adults were able to continue and complete their education, especially in the field of formal education (which is often not the case for publicly valid adult education programmes), but a significant share of non-formal education was stalled. The reasons are multifaceted, including the burning long-term irresponsible attitude of decision makers towards adult education, as the sector received virtually no support, neither in terms of technical equipment nor professional staff training. Within the sector, the most vulnerable have suffered the most and, furthermore, we cannot ignore the negative consequences for social relations and social inclusion. The topic of the social integration function of education is addressed, in an interesting way, by **Meta Furlan**'s article *Covid-19: It's time to rethink learning in the open public space*. During the pandemic, we were not only faced with the closure of schools and other public institutions; we were also rather limited in our access to the public open space. The author argues that the public open space offers a number of opportunities for informal learning and public pedagogy, it represents a space for building personal and community identities, for learning social rules, tolerance and joint action. All this is now limited, although – organized in a safe and careful way – it could further strengthen its role as a learning space even during a pandemic – for all generations and all social strata. The first section concludes with an article that deals with a very relevant topic, namely people's attitudes towards vaccination, which the authors **Monika Lamot**, **Marija Javornik Krečič** and **Andrej Kirbiš** explore in relation to the levels of education and trust in the healthcare system. In their study, they were interested in whether more educated individuals in Slovenia showed better knowledge about vaccination, whether education was related to the intention to get vaccinated against Covid-19 and whether the level of trust in the healthcare system moderated these relationships. Their findings are presented in the article *Impact of education on vaccination knowledge and the Covid-19 vaccine uptake intention in Slovenia: Does trust in the healthcare system moderate the effects?*

The second section includes contributions that address the issues of leading schools and educational institutions during a pandemic and analyse the role of school counselling services. In *The challenges of school leadership in emergency situations*, **Jana Kalin**, **Klara Skubic Ermenc** and **Jasna Mažgon** present the findings of their study conducted among primary- and secondary-school head teachers at the time of the school closure and the introduction of distance teaching in the spring of 2020. The findings indicate that due to the absence of a unified policy, the responses of leaders differed significantly, demonstrating a great deal of difficulty, improvisation and reliance on their own sources of knowledge. However, the situation encouraged cooperation among employees and strengthened their professional development, which is a good model for the further development of schools as learning organizations. A similar study to the one from Slovenia was also conducted on a sample of Lithuanian primary- and secondary-schools head teachers. The findings are presented by **Lina Kaminskienė**, **Vidmantas Tūtlys**, **Genutė Gedvilienė** and **Ling Yi Chu** in the article *Coping with the pandemic and the school lockdowns: The perspective of Lithuanian school principals*. In Lithuania, too, school leaders faced insufficient support from school authorities, which encouraged schools to take a proactive stance and strengthen cooperation. A comparison between the Slovenian and Lithuanian situations shows, however, that in Lithuania this support was more significant, and it was reflected in a more unified approach to the implementation of distance teaching. In both countries, the problems in assessing knowledge and establishing contacts with some students were the most pronounced. The school counselling service is also extremely important in establishing a co-operative atmosphere at the school, which is especially true for emergencies. This is the conclusion made by **Petra Gregorčič Mrvar**, **Katja Jeznik**, **Marjeta Šarić** and **Barbara Šteh** in *Counsellors' coping with the Covid-19 epidemics*. This research study was also conducted in the spring and it shows that counsellors were important actors in resolving various situations related to the relationships between adults (parents) and children or adolescents, to educational work and issues, teachers' dilemmas over the implementation of distance school-work, as well as to leading educational institutions. Having analysed key formal documents and interviewed experts, **Katja Černe** and **Janja Antić** examine the cooperation between politics and pedagogy during the pandemic, suggesting that the authorities were not able to justify their decisions adequately. Their article *The relationship between education policy and the pedagogical profession during the coronavirus epidemic* indicates that politics showed a contemptuous attitude towards the profession; therefore, the worrying research findings presented by a variety of research studies in recent months are not altogether surprising.

The third section consists of contributions that focus on the issue of distance teaching from the perspective of the students and young people who belong to frequently excluded social groups. The articles include important recommendations and solutions that deserve more attention in the future. **Nika Ferbežar**, **Mateja Marovič** and **Marko Gavriloski**'s article *Educational institutions and challenges that LGBTIQ+ Youth face during the Covid-19 pandemic* describes the specific and testing situation of LGBTIQ+ young people during the pandemic. The

authors present guidelines that educational institutions can implement to reduce the consequences of measures taken due to the pandemic. Schools are principally expected to advocate publicly for the rights of the LGBTIQ+ community and to provide psychosocial support in the challenges associated with losing a (safe) home and mental health problems. A good solution to support another vulnerable group of students was found at the school where the author **Laura Rožman Krivec** works, and she describes it in her article *Working with students with learning difficulties during distance learning*. In order to ensure continuous individualization and the provision of learning assistance to students with learning difficulties, a tutoring system was set up at the school. The system was evaluated, and it was found that all the students included in the tutoring system progressed in knowledge acquisition, developed digital competences, the learning to learn competence, and progressed to the next year. In the article *Assistance and support provided to students with executive function deficits during distance teaching*, **Tadeja Bagatelj** and **Sara Mičil** describe the workshops they prepared for students with executive function deficits to support their distance teaching. The workshops covered learning specific skills, such as strategies for organizing schoolwork, learning space and leisure time, strategies for efficient memorization, emotion management and regulation, and starting an activity. In the article, the authors present the findings of a pilot study that produced some encouraging outcomes and indicated possible improvements to be implemented in the future.

This special issue concludes with articles investigating distance teaching in higher education and from students' perspectives. In the article *Insights into learning and examination experience of higher education students during the Covid-19 pandemic*, **Polona Gradišek** and **Alenka Polak** discuss the findings of a study conducted among first-year students at the Faculty of Education in Ljubljana on how students experienced taking exams online. The findings are encouraging as, according to the students, the chosen teaching and learning methods and the fulfilment of distance teaching obligations have positively contributed to the development of their competences. They also highlight some of the problems and concerns that accompanied the process at the time. The authors conclude that distance teaching can succeed to some extent, but it cannot replace face-to-face teaching. Another research study was conducted among students of the same faculty in the spring, the authors of which are **Urška Žerak**, **Neža Podlogar**, **Amela Lišić**, **Lana Lavrih**, **Nina Fricelj** and **Mojca Juriševič**. They address the issue of self-regulated learning, which proved to be particularly important in the circumstances of distance teaching. According to their article *The characteristics of self-regulated learning of university students in distance education during the Covid-19 epidemic*, higher education teachers can guide students through adapted distance teaching and support them in optimal self-regulated learning. **Matej Plevnik** conducted a study among the students of Applied Kinesiology at the University of Primorska. In his article *The challenges of conducting practical exercises in the scope of an adapted educational process in higher education institutions during the Covid-19 epidemic*, he discusses the possibilities of adapting practical classes in swimming and water rescue. Despite the adapted compact implementation of the practical

classes, the students achieved statistically significant progress in the self-assessment of swimming skills throughout the period. The last, but no less relevant article, written by **Anja Podlesek** and **Voyko Kavcic**, is entitled *Generalized anxiety in Slovenian university students during the Covid-19 pandemic*. The authors conducted an online survey among the general population and among the student population on generalized anxiety, neuroticism, psychosocial vulnerability, loss of perceived control, and the impact of various epidemic-related problems. They found that students were characterized by higher generalized anxiety levels, greater loss of perceived control, and greater impact of epidemic-related problems compared to the general population. The study highlights possible risk factors for students' generalized anxiety during a health crisis and provides guidelines for the development of preventive measures.

The articles published in the thematic and special issues of our journal are proof of the vigour and flexibility of the (Slovenian) research sphere. They were written in specific circumstances, in which all the authors were thrown off the track in their pedagogical, professional, research, as well as study work (there are quite some students among the authors). Nevertheless, passion for research allowed them no rest and they studied the situations in which they found themselves. The products that emerged point the way forward: they include a number of guidelines that are required to develop a crisis plan to deal better with similar situations in the future. Moreover, research and experience have exposed the cracks in our education system that had already existed before the pandemic and – this is really essential – they have indicated the contours of a potentially fairer, higher quality, more inclusive and more responsive education.

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