Distance Learning During the COVID-19 Pandemic: School Barometer Lithuania

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Abstract. The COVID-19 pandemic unexpectedly changed the conditions of working and studying. It was mandatory in Lithuania to adhere to a personal isolation to protect yourself from the threatening spread of the virus in March–April 2020. Then schools, universities, vocational training centres, kindergartens and other educational institutions quickly adapted to the changed working conditions and switched to the provision of distance learning services. The aim of this article is to analyse the challenges faced by school communities in the transition to distance learning, and to provide good practice examples and insights for improvement. The survey was conducted using the School Barometer method.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, modes of teaching & learning, distance learning, School Barometer, Lithuania, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Western Europe.

Methodology: School Barometer

The School Barometer, a fast survey (in terms of reaction time, time to answer and dissemination time) was conducted in Germany, Austria and Switzerland during the early weeks of the school lockdown to assess and evaluate the current school situation caused by COVID-19. Later, the School Barometer was extended to an international survey, and some countries conducted the survey in their own languages. The aim of the School Barometer is to nationally and internationally monitor the current school situation by collecting perspectives of various actors (i.e. parents, students, school staff, school leadership, school authority, school support system). In doing so, it aims to contribute to an evidence-based or data-informed discussion within and between the persons involved (e.g. teachers, parents, politicians), institutions (e.g. schools, school authorities) and disciplines (e.g. education, policy). The School Barometer

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survey covers the following topics: information flow and information provision from policies, school authorities, schools, school leadership and teachers; reactions to the school lockdown caused by the COVID-19 crisis; perceived stress due to the COVID-19 crisis; students’ current situations at home; care and tutoring for students during the school lockdown by parents and school staff; digital teaching and learning, including demands, resources and practices; the role of school leadership and collaboration; the roles, motivations and competences of school staff; the demands, expectations and wishes of and for parents, students, school staff, school leadership, school authorities and the school support system.

In Lithuania, the School Barometer questionnaire was distributed April 2020, i.e. during the quarantine due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Members of school communities (N = 451) responded, and educators made up the biggest proportion (68%) among them. Other respondents also worked at school as administrative staff and social educators. Half of the educators in the survey worked in gymnasiums. These were mostly schools operating in the city (63%). It is also important to note that the respondents of the survey were the Lithuanian teachers who actively participated in the remote competence development webinars and consultations implemented by VMU Institute for Professional Development during the COVID-19 quarantine.

**Challenges in implementing distance learning**

The transition to distance learning has changed the style of teaching and the role of teacher. The respondents (70%) believe that the transition to distance learning posed serious challenges in school communities.

One of the challenges of distance learning was related to the peculiarities of students’ age and competences. Younger students could only complete the assigned tasks with the help of their parents. The workload of social and special educators seeking to differentiate learning tasks for students with special needs increased. Sometimes students lacked independence, responsibility, learning competence. The low level of computer literacy and the inability to use electronic diaries of some students and their parents became apparent.

The work of educators has become more visible in society and 34% of educators believe that the teaching profession has become more valued in the COVID-19 situation. However, the other side of the coin, i.e. the increased workload of educators has also emerged. According to one of the teachers: “it was necessary to check the tasks performed by the students in practically every lesson, more time had to be devoted to preparation, therefore the working hours increased and fatigue appeared”. It became more difficult to plan working hours. “Teachers’ working day is not normal – parents want to make contact both in the evenings and on weekends.” The educators think that there was a lack of clearly defined system of distance working.
The quarantine conditions due to COVID-19 and the sudden change in the nature of the work caused stress for some members of the school community (Lithuanian educators 21%). The respondents (26%) noted that students experience stress in a COVID-19 situation as well (Fig. 1).

![Fig. 1. School staff perceived stress during the Covid-19 pandemic](image)

*Fig. 1. School staff perceived stress during the Covid-19 pandemic*

N = 1.613–1.656 (Western Europe), N = 451 (Lithuania) (Stephan Gerhard Huber & Christoph Helm, Danguolė Bylaitė-Šalavėjienė)

Other challenges of distance learning were related to online networking activities and computer tools.

According to the educators: “during the quarantine the learning platforms were overloaded even at night and during the day there were difficulties in connecting online”, or “I had to use “hundreds of all kinds of platforms”. Sometimes teachers and students used old computer equipment because there were not enough funds in some areas to provide each teacher with a new computer. In many cases the educators had to use their personal computers, telephones and electricity. The teachers also raise a question how these costs will be reimbursed.

Finally, challenges arose due to the lack of digital learning content and methods. The teachers pointed out that there is a lack of digital learning tools and educators have to spend a lot of time “digitizing” tasks. They also faced a lack of methodologies for maintaining or enhancing students’ motivation, assessing and practical teaching while working online.
When discussing *the teacher competence development*, the respondents expressed the need to improve IT competencies. They expressed a desire to have more online in-service training programs.

In order to address the encountered challenges, the participants of the survey usually turned to the school head, parents and searched for other creative solutions.

**Parents’ support in distance education and expectations regarding it**

The respondents (60%) noted that they had received support from parents of students under quarantine and distance learning conditions.

The educators shared specific examples of parental assistance, such as donating tablets and computers to classmates, providing support with other technical means, offering transportation if there was a need to visit students. Parents were involved in planning “outdoor classes”, creating “chat rooms” on social networks, filming tasks performed by students, and consulting with each other on how to use online platforms. In the context of distance learning, parents played an important role in creating appropriate conditions for students to participate in lessons without hindrance. In most cases, parents assumed responsibility for motivating children to participate in distance learning lessons, controlled the teaching process, and analysed the recommendations provided by teachers. During distance learning, the workload of independent learning for students increased significantly, therefore parents were actively involved in finding ways to reduce this workload for their children. More active parents collaborated to discuss a schedule for virtual lessons. The educators noted that in many cases, parents responded when teachers wanted to contact them to discuss learning issues. During the quarantine, parents actively cooperated with teachers solving encountered problems, trusted the competence of teachers and school administration, actively participated in distance learning (webinars) organized for parents.

Parents often provided emotional reinforcement in support of a new form of learning. However, the respondents (35%) noted that parents’ expectations of the school in the face of COVID-19 were too high.

Some of the parents’ expectations were related to the organization of distance learning and teaching/learning methods. Parents required teachers to keep their children online without breaks (despite hygiene requirements), to deliver more distance learning lessons and to explain more. Parents were asking fewer self-directed assignments, more video lessons, more teacher-student communication and individual counselling services. Some parents wanted teachers to provide teaching services after their working hours.

Parents expressed expectations regarding the safety of children in the online space to prevent bullying online.
Some parents wanted teachers to provide computer equipment, food rations, and education support professionals to ensure full support to the student.

In fact, some parents expressed a wish to return their children to school as soon as possible for various reasons.

**Preparation of school communities for the implementation of distance learning**

Cooperation in the pedagogical community facilitated finding solutions to the challenges of distance learning. The pedagogues (74%) noticed that a high level of mutual assistance prevails in the school pedagogical community, teachers are motivated to implement distance learning in schooling practice (Fig. 2).

![Fig. 2. Collaboration among the school staff](image)

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\[N = 1.613–1.656 \text{ (Western Europe), } N = 451 \text{ (Lithuania) (Stephan Gerhard Huber & Christoph Helm, Danguolė Bylaitė-Šalavėjienė)*}

The educators (60%) together with their colleagues prepared learning material for distance learning in the COVID-19 situation (Fig. 4). The respondents (85%) mentioned that there is an ongoing discussion in the school pedagogical community in order to develop an appropriate strategy for the implementation of distance learning activities (Fig. 3).

Active learning and cooperation in the pedagogical community have become especially relevant also due to the lack of experience of the respondents (18%) in applying
different forms of distance learning in practice. The educators (20%) noted that it is not easy for them to develop distance learning processes.

Fig. 3. Collaboration among the school staff

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N = 1.613–1.656 \text{ (Western Europe)}, N = 451 \text{ (Lithuania)} \text{ (Stephan Gerhard Huber & Christoph Helm, Danguolė Bylaitė-Šalavėjienė)}
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The educators expressed a positive (20%) and neutral (60%) attitude towards the changed situation and the need to implement distance learning in the COVID-19 situation.

Positive reactions of teachers in the transition to distance learning are primarily related to the fact that distance learning is interesting for teachers. In addition, it is a great opportunity to improve professional competences (new IT platforms, new working methods, interdisciplinary integration, etc.) and to strengthen cooperation in school community (strategy of distance working, creation of digital content). The teachers actively registered for distance learning webinars.

Some educators saw work at home as a great opportunity to combine professional activities with family responsibilities. Working from home saved time that educators often waste in traffic jams or during the gaps between their lessons.

Some respondents saw the potential benefits of distance learning for students. Students are expected to become more independent, to value teachers and the school more.

The teachers noticed that after switching to distance learning, some unmotivated students revealed their strengths. The application of distance learning technologies more often revealed the creativity of students. The respondents (92%) noticed that by
applying distance learning methodologies, students can receive individual teacher consultations, teachers check how students perform tasks at home.

![Fig. 4. Collaboration among the school staff](image)

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In fact, there were also teachers in schools that lacked mutual understanding, felt too much control from the school administration, the burden of extra work and pointless paperwork. The respondents (13%) noticed that while studying online students sometimes felt being on holiday. The teachers used a variety of methods to communicate with students remotely, usually employing distance learning platforms. Over 50% of the respondents agreed that the technical capacities in the school are sufficient for web-based formats (Fig. 5).

**Proven distance learning tools and methods**

The respondents enlisted the proven means of distance learning. Padlet platform was mentioned as suitable for working in kindergarten. The following platforms were also mentioned by the respondents: Moodle, Microsoft Teams, Wordwall, Ziteboard, Google meet, Tamo dienynas [Tamo e-diary], Google Hangout Meet, Zoom, Eduka klasė [Eduka classroom], eTest, Ema, Google Classroom, IS “Mūsų darželis” [Our Kindergarten], Viber, Kahoot, eTest.lt, Hello Smart, Facebook, Messenger, Office 365, Egzaminatoriumius.lt [Examinator.lt], peliukai.lt [Littlemice.lt], Edmodo, Socrative, eTest, Išmani klasė [A Smart Class], GSuite, “Matematikos ekspertas” [Math Expert], Graasp platform, Go-Lab, LIno, Quizizz, eTwinning platform, Geterossword, Mentimeter,
Most of the time the teachers used a number of communication and distance learning tools, such as: “I submit the task in the Padlet program, send a link to the parents’ e-mails or the Viber program. I communicate with parents and children via mobile phone and Viber app: messages, chats, video calls. Parents also took an active part in taking photos, filming their child’s activities, completing tasks, sending them to teachers via the Viber program.” Another teacher writes: “Eduka, Ema are very helpful in primary education. We use video lessons on the Zoom platform. I provide individual consultations by video calls”. Another educator mentions: “Padlet app – for classes, messenger consultations and communication, Zoom for working with fellow educators”. The respondent notes: “Gymnasium uses Moodle, Zoom, I use additional tools like Google classroom, etc.”

However, the respondents noticed that not all distance learning tools and methods have proved to be successful in working with high special needs students (blind children,
the ones with complex disabilities, etc.), who are usually dealt with individually. Confusion for children and parents was caused by the abundance of distance learning tools used by teachers. The educators noted several cases of failure or difficulty in using certain remote learning platforms, such as Moodle, that had to be abandoned. It was difficult to use, the video room was constantly stuck, suitable only for senior students. The educators noticed that students did not like this platform. “The Moodle platform is too cumbersome, communication, sending and receiving tasks via TAMO – unnecessary system load.” According to the educators, the Eduka class did not work properly: “It takes a lot of action to upload something. Not all textbooks are available and there are few tasks for senior classes.”

The respondents noticed that it was almost impossible to join the Eduka platform. The Eduka platform stalled for the first week. “Eduka and Edmodo allow uploading small files but do not provide for a preschool program.” One of the teachers writes: “All the used electronic diaries got stuck”. Educators’ confidence has been lost in the Zoom platform: “Zoom hangs in the morning during school activities. Later it became clear that it was not safe to use this platform.”

Why do we not reach all students remotely?

After the introduction of distance learning during the quarantine, the issue of access to education became especially relevant and was actively addressed by education, public authorities, business representatives, and non-governmental organizations. The educators (83%) noticed that they reached up to 90–100% of the students remotely. The remaining respondents reached fewer students.

Why is it not possible to reach all students remotely? At the beginning of the quarantine, some of the students did not have the technical means suitable for distance learning (computer, Internet, poor Internet connection in rural areas, etc.) Some students were unable to join due to special needs.

The educators also noted that a small number of parents do not have IT skills, parenting skills and are not willing to cooperate with teachers and help children in the learning process. The teachers have come to the attention of families at social risk who do not control the participation of children in distance learning processes.

The respondents noticed that after the transition to distance learning, the motivation of some students to learn decreased.

Another problem arose during the quarantine: some parents took their children to their grandparents. This change in living conditions disrupted the usual learning rhythm of some students. Also, in the absence of compulsory school attendance, some students started working during the quarantine.
Recommendations

Despite the fact that only a small number of Lithuanian schools had previously used distance learning practices on a regular basis, the school community was able to focus on and solve the challenges together during the COVID-19 pandemic.

To provide high-quality distance learning services to schools in the future, it is important to achieve the following long-term goals: to update distance learning platforms, to develop digital learning content and new teaching methods that ensure involvement of all students.

Great attention should also be paid to the organization of distance learning in order to reduce the workload of students, parents and teachers and to improve working conditions, including the provision of appropriate computer equipment and internet access.

It is equally important to ensure continuous training of the school community members by introducing distance learning tools.

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Nuotolinis mokymas(is) COVID-19 pandemijos metu: Mokyklos barometras Lietuvoje

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Santrauka

COVID-19 pandemija netikėtai pakeitė sąlygas, kuriomis turėjome dirbti ir mokytis. Laikytis asmeninės izoliacijos, siekiant apsaugoti save bei artimuosius nuo gręsmingo viruso plitimo, 2020 m. kovo–balandžio mėn. Lietuvoje buvo privaloma sąlyga. Mokyklos, universitetai, profesinio rengimo centrai, mokymo centrai, vaikų lopšeliai–darželiai ir kitos ugdymo institucijos skubiai prisitaikė prie pasikeitusių darbo sąlygų, perėjo prie nuotolinio mokymo paslaugų teikimo.

Šio straipsnio tikslas yra išanalizuoti iššūkius, su kuriais susidūrė pedagogai, tėvai, perėjus prie nuotolinio mokymo, ir pateikti geruosius veiklos pavyzdžius bei įžvalgas veiklai tobulinti. Tyrimas buvo atliktas, naudojant „School Barometer“ (liet. „Mokyklos barometras“) metodą.

Esminiai žodžiai: COVID-19 pandemija, mokymo(si) formos ir būdai, nuotolinis mokymas(is), Mokyklos barometras, Austrija, Lietuva, Šveicarija, Vokietija, Vakarų Europa.

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