Parents’ Approaches to Their Children’s Education and Related Issues During the COVID-19 Pandemic in the Slovak and the Czech Republic

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Abstract
In this article, we present the results of the qualitative research and the thematic discourse analysis of discussions of Facebook groups of parents of pupils in Slovakia and the Czech Republic. The aim was to identify how the parents perceived the issue of distance learning during the COVID-2 pandemic and how they approached the problems that they encountered. Parents step into the role of a teacher and of a pupil; they are participants and observers of the educational process and advisors and supporters of their children. They evaluate the educational process from the didactics and the instructive point of view but they lack competencies that belong to teachers. Insufficient digital literacy and lacking equipment in households regarding ICT represent a weak point. Problems linked to the loss of social contacts and isolation are growing in number. Families also struggle with economic and logistics problems.

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Introduction

Considering various sources, distance and online education can be defined in different ways (cf. Mišút, 2013; Stafford Global, 2020; Stauffer, 2020; ViewSonic, 2020). Educational technology experts distinguish between the ‘highly variable design solutions that have been developed and implemented: distance learning, distributed learning, blended learning, online learning, mobile learning, and others’ (cf. Hodges, Moore, Lockee, Trust, & Bond, 2020). From the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, distance education in the Slovak and the Czech Republic was understood to be online learning via the internet and off-line learning with no direct instructions and with the pupils completing the tasks that they received in a paper form. Until the pandemic, the variability of distance learning in both countries was lower than in some other countries in the world. With the advent of the pandemic, there arose the necessity for a change in the format of education, from elementary to secondary schools, up to the tertiary level. The educational activities in nursery schools had also been affected.

The term Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) or Emergency Remote Education (ERE) is used worldwide to refer to education in times of disaster or other crisis (cf. Hodges, Moore, Lockee, Trust, & Bond, 2020; Schlesselman, 2020; Shim & Lee, 2020; Sosa Díaz, 2021; Ulla & Perales, 2021; Whittle, Tiwari, & Williams, 2020). In the Slovak nor in Czech educational reality, the term ERT did not take place during the pandemic.

In March 2020, government regulations in the Slovak and Czech Republic led to the closure of all schools and school facilities, and within a week or two education shifted to a distance format, which was understood as online learning. Neither schools nor pupils or parents were prepared for this change, and several obstacles surfaced, predominantly in the area of digital literacy, access to technical equipment and online educational opportunities for all groups of citizens/pupils.

Within a short period of time, non-governmental organizations addressed the emerging situation by creating programs to teach some of the subjects. Later the ministries in cooperation with television networks provided educational programming and tackled the issue of technical equipment in households. Teachers began using well-known platforms to teach their subjects.

One weak link was the fact that there was very little public awareness of the off-line learning. By the end of the 2019/2020 school year, thousands of...
children in the Slovak and the Czech Republic were left without any instruction (cf. Rafael & Krejčíková, 2020).

At the end of that school year, both countries conducted surveys on education during the state of emergency (cf. Kalibro, 2020; StranaSpolu, 2020) and both countries also participated in the survey taken through Europe’s online platform School Education Gateway. The researches indicated that untapped potential still exists on the part of the state, the teachers, the pupils and the parents. The researches in other countries has highlighted some similar problems that emerged in the educational process during the pandemic (cf. Carrión-Martínez, Pine-Martínez, Pérez-Esteban, & Román-Sánchez, 2021; Ferreras-Listán, Hunt-Gómer, Moreno-Crespo, & Moreno-Fernández, 2021; Misirli & Ergulec, 2021; Sosa Díaz, 2021; Vuorikari, Velicu, Chaudron, Cachia, & Di Gioia, 2020).

The new school year began utilizing a regular regimen of education classes, but by October 2020 both countries had returned to the distance form of learning with several exceptions. During December 2020 and January 2021, authorities considered reopening the schools, but the ongoing prevalence of the pandemic made a full-scale reopening in January 2021 impossible.

The emergency measures and solutions in the field of education led to various reactions from different groups of citizens and institutions, mainly from teachers and parents of school-age children, and mainly on social networks. Comparing the pre-pandemic period with the pandemic phase, education began to attract a greater level of attention as demonstrated by the parents’ interest in the development and significance of the education of their children.

This article is about the approaches of parents of school-age children to the distance form of education in the Slovak and the Czech Republic and focuses on the examination of their perception of educational matters and related issues during the first and the second waves of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as their expression of experience, attitudes and suggestions in the context of distance education and school-related matters.

Slovak and Czech Education in the Past and Today

Having previously been part of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, in 1918 the Czech and the Slovak Republic formed a single state – the Czechoslovak Republic. As a single state, both countries experienced several school reforms – from the time of the bourgeois republic, through the longest period under the socialist regime and a short common period of democracy. The beginning of the year 1993 saw the formation of two separate states – the Slovak Republic and the Czech Republic.

During this common history, the decades of a unified school system as well as the proximity of both languages, which evolved from the same Proto-Slavic
language, today are reflected in the similar functioning of the educational process and matters of education in general.

In both countries, compulsory school education begins at the age of six, with nine grades of elementary school, followed by a two-to-five-year period of education at the secondary level. The next step is the lower tertiary education possibly followed by a higher tertiary education at a college or university, provided a secondary school-leaving examination has been successfully passed.

However, the broader range of alternative schools and more variation of secondary technical schools in the Czech Republic compared to those in Slovakia remains a significant difference.

The educational programs in both countries have a similar structure and content and the educational requirements and the qualifications for the teaching staff are fairly comparable.

Several reforms have led to the new concepts such as competence/competency, educational area, content and performance standard, two-tiered education, cross-sectional issue as well as concepts of communication, media, financial or information literacy, creating a bridge to digital and global competences. These are the new skills which are part of school and lifelong learning, the undergraduate training of future teachers and their continuous learning.

There was no significant participation of parents/legal guardians in school activities in the era of the socialist regime. Teachers’ authority and the institutional authority of the school were broadly accepted and the parents did not demand the right to interfere with the educational process nor did they generally help out in school in any way. The family-school cooperation was purely formal.

The change of the regime in 1989 brought about a partial change, with the subsequent establishment of private and alternative schools and gradual school reforms. Today, parents are expected to cooperate and to help out, more often via material or financial support. During the recent decade, although parents have the opportunity to comment on the schools’ educational programs, a formal spirit of cooperation still prevails. The joint activities of parents/legal guardians and schools are of a much broader scope compared to the previous regime; though the degree of cooperation depends on the school itself.

Online learning and the broader concept, such as the distance education, had no place in the educational context until recently and were not anchored in the minds of teachers or parents. Distance education originated, thanks to commerce, economy, finance or management-focused companies, creating educational events aimed at clients’ professional and personal growth. The online form of education was also accepted by several universities. Individuals also took advantage of this type of education and began providing
services in their respective fields via webinars and tutorials. The online setting served primarily as a source of information for school lessons and only very few teachers used the opportunities offered by the internet as a tool for a part of their teaching.

The overall change of the situation in society in both countries triggered a change to distance education during the same period of time (March 2020).

Children, pupils, teachers and parents faced a new educational challenge. Though certain benefits of the distance online form of education are slowly becoming apparent, many difficulties have also been encountered.

Educational TV programs were introduced and several new websites and Facebook pages were created mainly at the initiative of teachers. The online setting became a place to exchange experiences and express requests, attitudes and opinions.

The parents also took the initiative and participated in creating several Facebook groups and support programs. The parent/teacher initiative led to a fundraising project to provide for laptops and tablets for children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds. Later this issue was also taken up by the education ministries.

Many teachers implemented the online format very quickly, while others were, however, surprised by this new reality. No training was available; the transition to online education was spontaneous. The educators explored new possibilities for using older platforms (Skype, YouTube, Hangouts, Facebook) as well as the most recent ones (Zoom, Google Meet, Teams). Their providers reacted promptly by extending the existing platforms utilizing new features and functionalities.

Since the start of the new school year (2020/21) and mainly since October 2020 when education once again changed to its distance format, the extent of the communication on social networks increased. New educational materials cropped up, group membership numbers increased, education professionals began organizing and providing more webinars. The pros and cons of distance education are conveyed not only by its direct participants – students and teachers – but also by parents or legal guardians of children. This new reality seems to lead, not just to new challenges, but existing problems are also more explicitly highlighted.

Though there is no physical presence, the online bullying still appears to exist and families with high running tensions see these tensions becoming intensified while more tranquil families have bonded together more strongly. Parents who trusted their children are also more relaxed when it comes to online education. Whether proud or disappointed with their children, parents who are accustomed to expressing their opinions take the online space as an opportunity to become even more vocal. The same applies for attitudes towards the schools or teachers. The online space is a tool to express satisfaction or dissatisfaction.
Method

A qualitative approach and the thematic content analysis of the discourse in Facebook groups were used (cf. Botelle & Willott, 2020).

To ensure the credibility of the research and the study findings, we

- critically reflected the methods to ensure sufficient depth and relevance of data collection and analysis;
- accounted for personal biases which may have influenced findings’ (cf. Noble & Smith, 2015); we did not take part in discussions in Facebook groups;
- took care of careful transcripts of discussions and transparent processing of data and results (cf. Noble & Smith, 2015);

used the triangulation strategy by convergence of information from different sources (cf. Bashir, Tanveer Afzal, & Azeem, 2008; Carter, Bryant-Lukosius, DiCenso, Blythe, & Neville, 2014; Golafshani, 2003; Noble & Smith, 2015) and by additional interviews with parents. We have been comparing the results of our analysis with the results acquired from interviews with parents of school-age children. After that the comparison (our results) with the studies and preliminary reports focused on education during the pandemic in both countries followed.

Research Questions

The study focused on the approach of parents of school-age children to distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. The specific objectives were to learn how the parents perceive the matter of education in terms of their families and how the families function. We are also interested in knowing how the parents confronted the issues encountered during the distance learning.

The main question and the partial questions follow the presented objectives.

Sample

The research sample consisted of education and parenting-focused Facebook groups. Parents were the contributors. The study took place from March 2020 until the end of January 2021. Due to the growing number of supporters, contributors and a rapidly growing number of statuses (posts) and comments (remarks to the statuses) in 2020/21, we have narrowed the sample to two groups: A Czech group which was created as a part of a non-profit organization established in 2016 currently having more than 4500 followers; and a Slovak group, created in March 2020 having more than 39,000 followers at the end of January 2021. Both groups are public. In both groups, comments
have been provided by both, women and men, Slovak and Czech citizens. The Slovak group received more Slovak posts and the Czech group received more Czech posts.

The triangulation was based on two men and three women, who were interviewed.

In Slovakia:
Teacher and a father of five children – two are high-school students, two are elementary school pupils and one child is of preschool age. During the pandemic, he was teaching online and his wife was on maternity leave. The communication with him was conducted over the phone and by electronic mail.

The second participant was a mother of four children – two of preschool age and two of school age. During the first outbreak of the pandemic, the mother was on maternity leave, during the second outbreak she returned to work. Both she and her husband are professionals who are part of the front line of the population or of the critical infrastructure at the time of the pandemic. The communication with her occurred over the phone and through online conversation using Skype and electronic mail.

The second female participant was a mother of two children of school age, presently unemployed, whose husband works for another country. The family moved to Slovakia from an English-speaking country and at home they speak exclusively in English although the children attend a Slovak elementary school. We conducted online and phone conversations with the mother.

The participants from the Czech Republic:
A father of two children of school age who works in a government run forestry. His wife works in public administration. The conversation was conducted through electronic mail.

The female participant was the mother of four children – two are adults and two are of school age. She is a nurse and her husband is unemployed. The dialogue took place on an online platform of Skype. The additional information was acquired through electronic mail.

The participants were asked to give their opinions on the distance learning of their children during the pandemic and to express their ideas about the situation of distance learning. How did they experience it and how did their families function during the pandemic. The parents were guaranteed anonymity.

Procedures and Analytic Approach

The sources of research data were the texts of Facebook statuses and the following comments (remarks) of individual contributors. We copied the texts into individual documents. The data of the conversations were the texts of the electronic mail communications and the transcripts of the recorded conversations. The first part of the analysis consisted in working with the data from the Facebook groups. In the statuses, we identified the themes completed by the comments. Then we
concentrated on the new themes surfacing from the comments. We completed the themes by adding additional levels and new comments. The themes were converted into categories, which were saturated. Simultaneously with the process of creating the themes and categories, we worked on the analysis of the discourses. We concluded the process when new themes stopped surfacing. Some themes were included in several categories. At the same time, we realized the thematic content analysis (cf. Braun & Clarke, 2019; Caulfield, 2020). The process of classification of the themes and of their combinations resulted in the following categories: realization of the online education, disruptive influences, content and organization of the educational process and the content of teaching, teachers, suggestions and advice, parents’ roles, children with special needs, truancy and bullying, self-discipline, household logistics, health, economic issues, comparison with other countries and the positive values of distance learning.

In the second part, we did the analysis of the transcripts of the conversations and their comparison. We compared the results of our analysis with the results from the reports of other institutions and of the research done in Slovakia and in the Czech Republic.

**Findings**

A smaller number of topics and related problems were discussed during the first outbreak as compared to the second one.

The second outbreak saw the creation of new education-focused Facebook groups, participation of more parents in discussions and more supportive suggestions and programs. New topics were introduced and a higher level of criticism and dissatisfaction was revealed, though there were also more suggestions on how to solve the problems presented.

The following themes and sub-themes were created during the categorization and analysis process:

| Themes                      | Sub-themes                                      |
|-----------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|
| Delivery of the online education – the process | • Technical issues/difficulties               |
|                             | • Being online at the same time                  |
|                             | • The abuse of platform functions                |
|                             | • Stress                                         |
|                             | • Pupils’ digital skills                         |
|                             | • Use of other devices among pupils               |
|                             | • Attitudes towards online education             |

(continued)
| Themes                                | Sub-themes                                                                 |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Disruptive factors – external        | • Presence of family members  
• Pets  
• Surroundings noise  
• Mailman, courier etc. |
| Organization and content of the lessons and learning material | • Delivery and scope of the lessons  
• Content of the lessons  
• Parents’ suggestions for teaching possibilities |
| The Teachers’                         | • Teaching methods used  
• Evaluation methods  
• Communication with pupils |
| Parents’ tips and advices             | • Solutions to homework assignments  
• Tips for webinars, websites... |
| The parental roles                    | • Teacher  
• Helper  
• Student  
• Comforter  
• Observer  
• Evaluator |
| Special needs                         | • ADHD, PAS  
• Physical disability |
| School social pathology phenomena     | • Truancy  
• Bullying |
| Discipline and self-discipline        | • Browsing, chatting during lessons  
• Assignments and plan  
• Inability to organize time  
• Neglected habits and routines  
• Lifestyle  
• Cheating  
• Teacher’s supervision  
• Evasion of regulation |
| Household logistics                   | • One computer – more users  
• More children  
• Food  
• Parents in the work |
| Health                               | • Distance learning as health protection  
• Testing and vaccination  
• Face masks  
• Mental health  
• Social factors |
| Economic and material conditions      | • Socio-economic issues |
Delivery of the Online Education

This category included topics related to technical issues and connectivity:

‘At home we only have work laptops; they can’t be used for school.’

‘Each of us is online in his/her room; the problem really is when our daughter has problems with connection.’

‘My husband had to figure out the internet connection during the night…’

‘Even though everything was on, I had to restart the computer.’

Next issues related to children and parents being online at the same time and the use of platform features:

‘If we’re all connected at the same time, there are network failures.’

‘I am not going to buy any more PCs, we have to agree on who has to be online and when.’

The on/off feature of cameras and microphones was sometimes abused by pupils:

‘My son turned off his camera and went to take something from the fridge.’

Online activity was perceived as a stress factor:

‘The children are unhappy when their teacher thinks they do it on purpose.’

Internet connectivity and low level digital literacy on the part of both the pupils and the teachers are also perceived as problems:

‘My daughter cried when they were writing a grammar exam and she could not connect.’
‘Our child has a new PC, we purchased a new router and the connection still fails all the time, it is frustrating!’

‘They were having fun on their own, because the teacher suddenly disappeared.’

‘It took a while, until the whole class explained to the teacher how to turn on the sound. Teachers don’t know how or don’t want to work with these things.’

The potential of the internet and the use of other devices and features during the lessons accounted for another topic:

‘She chats with her classmates during lessons and then she is nervous that she couldn’t concentrate...’

‘I was watching my son and wanted to figure out what the teacher’s presentation on the screen was and I found out that my son was playing a computer game.’

‘They keep whispering right answers to each other during the lessons.’

‘In my daughter’s class somebody commented: Whose clock is ticking there?’

Attitudes towards online education present another topic:

‘Let’s vote who is for or against online education.’

‘Restrictions in school are more stressing than online lessons at home.’

‘I don’t know any child that would find the distance form of learning suitable.’

‘Well, for example, in our household it suits us perfectly.’

‘The distance form is unsuitable only for children with worse school performance and ‘with poor conditions for education.’

‘My son finds it much better to learn with a teacher, even if he is more or less a self-taught type.’

‘I disapprove of the online form, because a child in first grade should get to know the world by using touch, smell, and movement.’

‘I am against technology in first grade – social interactions can’t be replaced.’

‘Anyway, irreplaceable social interactions don’t mean they must attend the school.’

**Disruptive Influence**

This category was related to the presence of other family members:
‘We had a row with my husband and I did not even realize that my daughter had lessons.’

‘At the beginning it often happened that I just burst into my daughter’s room.’

‘My son comes out of his room and says to my other son: The teacher says that you should not shout for the entire flat but keep quiet’

or household pets:

‘They keep bringing the teacher dogs and cats as well as their toys, I really have to admire those teachers’

as well as surrounding noise:

‘The next-door flat is being reconstructed...’

‘I have written on the building’s entrance door not to drill during the online lessons, and the drilling stopped.’

The parents also see teachers being disturbed during the lessons:

‘The teacher had to cancel, because a courier arrived at her place.’

‘The daughter of our teacher was seen on the screen.’

**Organization and Content of the Lessons and Learning Material**

This category touches on the delivery and scope of the lessons:

‘Today they had four lessons, why do they not follow the recommendation of the ministry?!’

‘I don’t think it is sufficient to have only 8 lessons per week and that only in 3 subjects.’

‘It is not enough. When the children are able to spent x hours on their phone and watch TikTok, they should be able also to sit a couple more hours through online lessons.’

‘Once again there was no math.’

‘Our children have had no math at all so far.’

Discussion focused also on the content of the lessons:
‘So she just wanted to teach about various types of soil today and the children were supposed to get materials for that. Am I now to dig out soil from under the snow in the winter?’

as well as suggestions for possible in-person lessons:

‘In-person lessons should be made possible. To be taught outside in groups and as soon as possible.’

‘Outdoors, in the middle of November?’

‘Outdoor nurseries are able to do it, so why couldn’t older children be outside as well?’

‘Outside at any time. They can learn a lot of things and teaching while walking has been utilized since ancient times.’

The Teachers’

This category included topics related to the methods used to deliver the material and to assign homework:

‘Our teacher just sends out homework by e-mail.’

‘Those are the link forwarders.’

‘I do not consider just assigning homework to be a teaching.’

‘Giving housework and its evaluation is still work.’

‘Our teacher patiently explains everything, checks the assignments and waits until they finish writing.’

‘I was disappointed that a second-grader has up to 15 homework assignments for the weekend.’

‘My son keeps getting so much homework that we spend the whole weekend thinking only about his school.’

‘I can see what the various lessons look like and I can only praise some of the teachers, well actually all of them.’

Another topic included the checking and evaluation of the material taught:

‘I am surprised to see how many tests they have to take.’

‘I thought that the ministry recommended no testing.’
'Each day three quick tests, so that children can be assessed quickly and nobody cares that they all fail.'

'They keep progressing at the same pace and have very few marks to show for it.'

'The teacher keeps telling them that she is glad that they are capable of having 3 to 4 lessons on a tablet, that they are doing well'

as well as communication with pupils and teachers:

'I had the opportunity to listen to these eighth graders online – hats off to the teachers…'

'My son’s teacher spends time with the whole class every week and they talk about how they feel now.'

'I have heard him praising the entire class for how well they are coping with the situation. Many teachers take revenge on some of the children because their mothers are dissatisfied.'

**Tips and Advice**

This category includes parents’ requests for solutions to homework assignments, including links to webinars, online lessons, and websites:

'Any video or description, explanation of this topic for my daughter in eighth grade, please. This video is perfect. We and our daughter fretted a lot over this, but she can understand it very easily from this video.'

'Looking for a math teacher who will help my fifth-grade daughter to use the Roman numerals?'

Parents also shared advice on how to proceed when they wanted to stay at home during their children’s online education:

'If a parent claimed no pandemic care allowance so far and would start to do so next week, is an application necessary?'

'How to apply for various benefits without having to visit a branch?'

**The Parental Roles**

It is a category that contains the topics such as assuming the role of a teacher:

'I don’t know how to teach him that.'
‘I have no idea anymore, how to explain it to her.’

‘I am going crazy with this material on local studies, why she is not able to learn that.’

‘There are children who can’t handle the transformation of a loving mother to a teacher who corrects their math mistakes.’

‘In the spring it was a disaster, I studied everything with him together, however, the school has been very well prepared since the autumn’

a helper:

‘I have a first grader; you have to sit there with him for the entire lessons.’

‘When my children went to school, I was able to do most of my work, now it is entirely different, they need a lot of help.’

‘The third grader works totally independently and I sit with the first grader but I practically don’t have to help her’

or a student:

‘I do not understand these tasks and assignments at all.’

‘I have no idea how we are supposed to solve this.’

‘Is there any Czech language teacher that could explain this to us?!

During online lessons parents act not only as paraprofessional educators, but also as comforters:

‘I can already see her not being able to handle that, what do you do to make this situation easier for the children?’

‘I worry that she may lose habits and literacy, so we keep revising.’

‘Nowadays we talk a lot about how we are going to handle it all’

and as observers of the lessons:

‘As a parent now I can directly see and hear the relationship between teacher and pupil and that is interesting.’

Parents also put themselves in the role of evaluators of assignments and textbooks:

‘I just love these vague assignments in the textbook.’

‘The entire family has now completely fallen out because of a stupid textbook.’
‘It would have been enough to revise the textbook prior to its publication and have it tested not only by the smartest ones.’

**The Special Needs**

The parents are also faced with the issue of the education of children with special needs who have been mainstreamed into regular classes, such as children with ADHD or PAS:

‘He does not know how to work on a PC, he is not capable of keeping up.’

‘My child has no idea what he is supposed to do.’

‘My children are not missing school at all, distance learning suits them better, mainly my son, as an integrated pupil he really appreciates this style of teaching.’

‘My son has Asperger syndrome and online education suits him very well’

as well as children with a physical disability:

‘His poor vision gets only worse by staring at the display the whole day.’

**School Social Pathology Phenomenon**

The parents are aware of truancy and bullying, or attempts to do similar activities online:

‘It takes five minutes for them to answer, suddenly there is no connection, suddenly the microphone is not working... until the teacher threatens with writing up an absence, and then suddenly everything is working.’

‘My son told the teacher to ask somebody else, because he needed to finish eating, and that he would just turn off.’

‘My daughter’s classmate asked the teacher to move the lesson to another time, because he wanted to go outside with his friends.’

‘My daughter’s classmates always turned off her microphone, because the teacher had no idea, that she could control the settings.’

‘The classmates of our twins recorded their classmates while answering and then posted the videos on the internet.’

On the other hand, online teaching suits children who are bullied at school:

‘She is satisfied. Nobody’s bullying her now.’
**Discipline and Self-discipline**

This category contains the topic mentioned already that relates to website browsing or chatting during lessons and frequently leaving the computer. What also must be considered here is the problem of the inability to organize time – to schedule time for the completion of assignments and plan for rest time:

‘The longer my son is at home, the lazier he becomes.’

‘My children are at home since March 2020, with the exception of September and October. Can you imagine how lazy they are?!’

thereby neglecting the practices and routines used during regular classes:

‘They are unable to step up and do the work even in the presence of parents, even though in class my daughter usually is a real workhorse.’

‘He wrote his homework and when the teacher wanted him to read it, he could not find his notebook.’

‘He is unable to constantly sit in front of the PC, he keeps wandering off all the time’

and proper lifestyle:

‘Mine also keeps wandering off and is always searching for something to eat.

‘We are the worst parents because we switch off Wi-Fi at 23:00; his mates can stay up for how long they want.’

‘Nowadays since they are learning online... They stay up longer, because they get up later in the morning anyway.’

In this category, we included also the matters of cheating and the increased difficulty of teacher’s supervision:

‘A classmate confessed to my daughter, that she did the test the second time with her mother and got an A.’

‘When I see that they are exhausted, I just write it instead of them.’

‘My son’s classmates use chat to tell each other right answers.’

This category also addresses topics related to the evasion of regulations during the pandemic:
‘My children also keep asking after school each single day. But I am afraid in particular because there are irresponsible people who feel the need to lie and cheat in these matters.’

‘I am afraid to send my kids to school, because parents keep saying that they couldn’t care less about getting tested.’

Other categories touch on the topics of family life and strife while taking part in distance education.

**Logistics**

It is a category that includes already mentioned topics of computer use of several household members, as well as nutrition, but also care for pre-school age children alongside of school-age ones, presence or absence of parents in the household and in the work, pandemic care, allowance etc.

‘Nowadays the children keep disturbing each other when learning and I have to pay much more attention to them.’

‘Many children do not have the possibility of a parent staying home and being home alone for the whole day is not ideal; we should address that.’

‘We let the younger one to help the older one with the online stuff, because he is a mainstreamed pupil.’

‘My child is in the first grade and I would prefer to spend time with him at home, but my employer refuses to allow that.’

‘Suddenly I have to cook for all of us every day, check homework and still do my own work.’

**Health**

It is a category running through the entire topic of the pandemic. The parents deal with a distance education also in terms of health protection:

‘I am thankful for the distance education, because I was getting worried about how the sanitary measures are being followed in the school.’

‘I am glad that they are not in school, because this way at-risk groups get protected.’

‘My daughter has an autoimmune disease and when in school she kept getting sick all the time, because her classmates came sick to school, now I would not let her go to school because of the coronavirus.’
These topics went hand in hand with the matter of coronavirus testing and vaccination:

‘Nobody will stick things down my nose or the nose of my children.’
‘I will not allow my children to be vaccinated, just read what the side effects are.’
‘If we and our children haven’t been vaccinated in the past, maybe we would not even be here now.’

Part of the equation are also topics related to mental health and social factors influencing children’s and parents’ experiences and mindsets:

‘They are missing social interaction very much. A child’s soul will simply be affected and this will be shown in a couple of years.’
‘My ten-year-old child keeps crying at home because he misses the teacher and the classmates.’
‘We have a first-grader and a daughter who is going to graduate secondary school and both miss social interaction.’
‘Now they don’t want to be at home anymore, online lessons are not enough for them, they need a specific environment for learning.’
‘Being taught online for the second year already keeps stressing them out terribly, they worry whether they will be able to manage it all.’
‘My son in fifth grade keeps saying over and over again that he would like to go back to school. He says he is unable to focus on Zoom lessons so well as he would be able in school. His attention strays, he often reports being tired.’
‘Socialization of autistic children in this society is a separate topic, so I would like if we would dispose of the familiar notion that everyone misses school. These children don’t miss it and the socialization for this group of children is somewhat different – they are often fine with having one single friend.’

The matter of health coincides with the issue of face masks:

‘I can’t pay attention to them at home. They should follow the rules and be taught in schools, but there would be no distancing, the face masks would be wet and dirty, disinfection would keep getting ignored.’
‘Bacteria and mold spores can be found on a face mask after a mere half an hour of breathing and if a child has only one face mask for the entire school day, that is like a great Petri dish on his/her face.’
'To wear a face mask with a snotty rag is a torture for healthy children; they should either go to school without face masks or they should stay at home.'

‘When the children wore face masks in school, they did not get sick at all.’

**Economic and Material Conditions**

This category contains matters that are being tackled by parents more in terms of looking for advice, or sharing information related to socio-economic issues:

‘There are many parents, whose children are unable to learn independently even at the age of 11 or 12, therefore, it would be great, if their parents could also take the advantage of the care allowance, so that they don’t lose their jobs.’

‘It’s unfair, how are we supposed to survive with a support like this?’

‘Here is a link with more information on how to handle this.’

**Comparison With the Situation in Other Countries**

With suggestions on what things might look like in Slovakia or the Czech Republic, comparison with the situation in other countries is also one of the categories:

‘In many countries the schools have not been closed and children have been wearing face masks during the entire day and they even have had longer school days than we do.’

‘In Sweden, the politicians have never closed the schools.’

‘The government is only scaremongering and creating an artificial epidemic; take a look at America or the north of Europe.’

**Positive Aspects of Distance Education**

This is the last category. The parents appreciate that their children have acquired some new skills:

‘I can see how she learns to communicate politely when she needs something on the computer.’

‘She has to speak up when she does not know something and when something is not working online.’

‘They are forced to look for solutions.’
‘They acquire transferable skills – from the online education to in-person lessons.’

The parents appreciate the reduction of the content of the lessons:

‘They are being taught less filler’

and the elimination of certain difficulties:

‘They don’t have to lug around 7.5 kilograms of textbooks and handouts every day.’

‘There are no absences, she can follow the lesson even if she has a cold.’

‘He has his own space, for his own self-realization.’

‘He gets often bored in school, compensating his need for socialization in the online space.’

‘Those nano face masks were not breathable enough and my child’s face got sores, the distance education approach has sorted it out.’

Parents can also see some benefits when it comes to family relationships:

‘They learned to cook.’

‘They learned that they can’t have everything instantly, they learn to be patient.’

‘I started doing push-ups with my son and I teach my daughter to paint.’

‘We have learned more respect as a household.’

‘Suddenly we do more things together – walks in nature, cooking together...’

**The Next Part of the Research: Triangulation**

The results of Facebook groups’ analyses have been compared with the outcomes of interviews with parents and the conclusions of already completed studies and final reports of the respective institutions in the Slovak and the Czech Republic.

The interviews with parents showed that aside from issues which the parents address in the Facebook groups, the education of children of foreigners is a separate issue. These children face the fundamental problem of a language barrier, and the consequence of online education is then a lack of understanding associated with a lack of motivation and subsequently school performance. The parents of these children also encounter a language barrier which leads to problematic communication with the school. On the other
hand, these parents can see very little interest, almost no interest, in their children, on the part of the schools.

The results of further studies and final reports also point to the inadequacy of tackling the issue of education of children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds or children from families with alternative lifestyles who do not use the internet and social networks.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

The first days of distance education brought about some degree of novelty. After a while, children began displaying signs of being overworked, unmotivated, stressed and in many cases also a feeling of loss of social interaction. Some schools have not changed to distance education until the end of the school year. Many schools did not teach some subjects even in the next term, and most of the schools reduced the extent of the content of their lessons.

The positive aspects of online education can be seen in instances where teachers have the format well in hand, have developed their digital skills, cooperated with pupils and respected mental hygiene. Two main challenges have been revealed by this research. One, the new reality of education brings about new problems regarding mainly digital skills of teachers, pupils and parents and attitudes towards online education. Two, existing problems have become intensified or have received more attention. Due to the existing social networks, these issues are being brought closer to the surface and are being more widely discussed.

All these issues are reflected by parents in different positions and with different points of view. They perceive the lessons through the eyes of their children, in association with their experiences and attitudes towards the process of education. Many of the parents could indirectly observe and comment due to online access.

The parents are aware of the fact that the teachers’ frustration is related to their inability to function in the online space and within the distance format. We see this aspect as the already mentioned shortcoming in the information and communication technology area and the lack of preparation for the change in the reality of education. The same applies to the children. Even though their use of digital tools is more flexible than their teachers or parents, the new way of education fails to provide adequate conditions for good learning and for the process of education in general.

Distance education demands the use of some specific pedagogic methods and tools and the elimination of some commonplace ones. Flexibility and reaction to the new reality proved to be an issue and a challenge at the same time. The undergraduate training and the continuing education of teachers need to extend to the area of digital skills and soft skills necessary for new situations, such as prevention of undesirable occurrences (manipulation,
truancy and bullying). However, even parents lack digital skills, and it seems that they need them not only to at least passively participate in education, but also when it comes to the prevention of misinformation (cf. Yar & Stolton, 2020).

The distance online education which took place until January 2021 has its limits even with the full engagement of schools: experiential learning, direct gaining of certain knowledge and skills through sense perception is minimalized, social contacts and the subsequent social interactions essential for learning are limited. Mental health is neglected, cooperative teaching and mutual learning as well as non-verbal communication, creation of group dynamics and teaching of practical subjects are reduced. These are significant aspects of education which parents often do not notice or see just little value in them.

Parents see themselves as experts on education in terms of its content and scope, use of methods, formats, and tools. Even though they can be present during online education of their children, their perspective is only one of the viewpoints and is often seen and presented through the eyes and experiences of their children.

The process of evaluation and assessment of children’s education in the online space is influenced by certain expectations and stereotypes. The online education demonstrated that the Slovak and Czech educational systems still rely on the cumulative evaluation of pupils. The grade is the benchmark of success and takes up significant importance in the overall evaluation of children, while there is only very little evidence suggesting that the education process is more important than success or performance (cf. Dweck, 2015, 2016). Formative evaluation is underappreciated, applied mostly in alternative schools and to a certain extent at the primary level of education. The teachers are expected to provide the children with a result and not a way to reach it, and parents’ approach to the process of their children’s preparation for lessons is confirmed to be similar. The sharing of statuses and comments in Facebook groups revealed more of the so-called helicopter and lawnmower parents. The former is overly engaged in the life of their children, too protective, too anxiously investing in all the areas of their children’s life and world (cf. Cui, Darling, Coccia, Fincham, & May, 2019; Padilla-Walker & Nelson, 2012); the latter go even further and eliminate any obstacles their children might face in life, hoping to prepare them for a successful life (cf. Spector, 2019). The Facebook groups present a good opportunity to make it easier for their children to obtain good grades, to succeed and to complete assigned tasks.

Conversely, the process of online education demands a higher level of parental engagement particularly with regard to younger school-age children, mainly in terms of material equipment of households, the logistics of the family functioning, and the preparation for lessons.
The new educational reality has justified parental engagement in the process to help the children in certain phases. In some cases, parents need to replace to some extent, the classmates or the teachers.

Conversely, there is a group of helpless parents, who cannot or are not able to fill these roles nor can they check on their children, because they, themselves, lack the skills, knowledge, and tools, but mostly they do not have the time. Another group of parents saw this period of time not only as an issue, but also as a challenge and an opportunity with positive aspects. The children will learn new skills, become more independent, and the family has the opportunity to demonstrate its strengths, on which it can build.

A certain degree of solidarity, fellowship, empathy and aid have been exhibited by the parents in the online educational process. The possibility of finding support and advice through social networks is a plus, but on the other hand, many demands are inadequate. Likewise, not all recommendations, advice or solutions to problems have been straightforward and correct.

Online education and communication on social networks mean also some level of loss of privacy. Parents have been boasting about their children’s performance, but also publicly disclosing their failures or even some of their inappropriate and dishonest behaviour (such as plagiarized work).

The public disclosure of information is one of the risks of Facebook groups, as it is a presentation of the children’s mental level, behaviour or personal problems. Even though the parents do not disclose the names of their children, it is possible to identify them from their parents’ profiles. The same is true of the identification of teachers, as the parents post on social networks the information about their teaching methods. Social networks reveal also family matters: roles in families, responsibility for education, relationships or social and material problems. Even though the myriad of Facebook groups, statuses and comments bury this information within a couple of days, it does not disappear from the internet and is still available to the public.

Communication through social networks also revealed the issue of parents’ social and psychological rank (cf. Koski, Xie, & Olson, 2015).

The comparison of the Czech and Slovak sources revealed topics that one group tackled more than the other. Czech parents considered it important to demand alternatives and options. Government regulations and requirements were straightforward in both countries; on the Czech side the parents also demanded alternatives and options, not only in comments and categories, but also in the formulation of petitions and appeals to demonstrations. Slovak parents were polarized, they were either for the measures or against them, yet bearing in mind that they should apply to everyone in the same way. Slovak parents came through with more help, shared ideas, advice, and tips related to education.

The process of triangulation suggests that there are significant crossovers of topics and issues of education during the pandemic, as stated by the parents.
in the Facebook groups. Personal interviews, studies and reports also revealed matters that either eluded Facebook, or were mentioned only marginally. These concerned the education of children from minorities – foreigners as well as children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, in particular from Romany families.

It appears that parents of children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds as well as parents of foreign children do not participate in these discussion groups.

The studies have shown that during the first outbreak of the pandemic in Slovakia more than 50,000 children (from more than 660,000 elementary and secondary school pupils) received no lessons. The government sector failed to pay any particular attention to these children and their families. One of the reasons for the lack of lessons was the fact that children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds have had neither technical equipment nor internet access. In a few cases, the teachers addressed the situation with off-line lessons in cooperation with teaching assistants and representatives of non-governmental organizations representing the minorities concerned.

Despite the fact that in Slovakia ‘to eliminate the language barriers, basic and advanced language courses of the official language are organized for children of foreigners [245/2008 Coll, Sec 146(3)]’ and also despite the fact that in the Czech Republic the law provides for supporting measures, it has become apparent, that online learning is more difficult for the children of foreigners, due to the language barriers, than for children who speak the official language. Another issue is also the fact that their parents often are not sufficiently informed and due to the language barriers their communication is hampered as well. Even with children of foreigners this is more a matter of non-governmental organizations which, based on their studies, pointed out the shortcomings and limitations and thus have become more interested in the respective education.

The pandemic era has revealed strengths and weaknesses of the education in the Slovak and the Czech Republic. At the same time, the urgency of some changes in the education and training for the teaching profession has also been highlighted. Online learning has confronted parents with blank intervals in education and offered them the possibility to get more engaged in the process of possible changes. This new form of educating children unveiled some problems in families, and also intensified already existing issues. These are phenomena to be faced not only by families but by the entire society in the future.

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Notes

1. The Slovak and Czech word kompetencia/kompetence is polysemantic and expresses the meaning of both the English competence and competency.
2. We use the term credibility in qualitative research as the analogy to the terms reliability and validity employed by quantitative research (cf. Noble & Smith, 2015).

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