

**THREE EUROPEAN COUNTRIES EXPERIENCE IN DELIVERING
QUALITY EDUCATION TO SCHOOLCHILDREN AMID COVID-19
PANDEMIC: A COMPARATIVE STUDY**

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Introduction. After the modern humanity witnessed an unprecedented global health emergency connected with coronavirus and the World Health Organization declared the highest level of alarm [8; 9], the governments in many countries throughout the world took comprehensive steps at the legislative and executive levels to prevent its spread. Not to expose the schoolchildren and students to the danger of SARS-CoV-2, the stay-at-home orders were introduced and academic institutions in many countries including kindergartens, schools and higher education institutions were temporarily closed. And although all the countries were united in the fight against coronavirus disease, the reality however demonstrated that there was not a centralized approach to support schoolteachers and schoolchildren after the closures of academic institutions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic and each country had to find its solution to remedy the situation which arose unpredictably.

Aim. The main aim of the study was to compare challenges teachers and schoolchildren in three European countries (Latvia, the Slovak Republic and the Czech Republic) faced regarding remote teaching and learning and to examine their good practices in delivering quality education to schoolchildren amid Covid-19 pandemic.

Materials and methods. To achieve the main aim of the study the following research methods were applied, namely, netnographic analysis, theoretical analysis of information sources and comparative analysis.

Results and discussion. Thus, in Latvia once the emergency situation was declared various types of academic institutions (pre-school education institutions, general education institutions, vocational education and training institutions) were closed [4] and remote teaching and learning replaced conventional face-to-face instruction. The single exception involved pre-school education institutions which were allowed to organize on-duty groups for those children whose parents had no opportunity to stay with them at home [4]. It should be noted that in Latvia remote teaching and learning provided by general secondary institutions was supported by several platforms which were developed to deliver essential educational information and interactive activities for schoolchildren and guidelines for schoolteachers. These platforms included E-klase, Uzdevumi.lv and Soma.lv. Moreover, a special educational TV channel called Tava Klase was created and began airing educational programmes for schoolchildren [7]. According to OECD, the educational material broadcast on the national television and online “was developed by over 70 teachers with support from a voluntary parents’ group” [7, p. 5].

In Czech Republic all academic institutions including primary, secondary and professional schools were closed for the period from 11th March to 11th May 2020. As it is mentioned by Brom et al. [2], since the overall learning load was transferred to homes it was the parents who were the most heavily engaged in helping children with their homework, teaching them new topics and explaining task instructions. It is explained by the fact that at first the move to remote teaching and learning included sending assignments to schoolchildren. And only then as the lockdown continued

online communication between teachers and schoolchildren became more regularized and better structured [2]. It has to be noted that the most serious problems parents, schoolchildren and teachers faced included the poor access to the Internet, the inability to organize effective interaction between schoolchildren and teachers, the lack of teachers' experience and digital competence in delivering education remotely, inequality connected with schoolchildren's availability to computers and mobile devices. According to Brom et al. [2], before the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in the Czech Republic the majority of schoolteachers did not have sufficient background in online teaching. It meant that for the majority of schoolteachers working under unpredictable conditions was rather challenging and stressful. To assist schoolchildren and students, teachers, educators and parents, the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports of the Czech Republic designed a special website through which it provided its "centralizing advice, guidelines and tools" (6, p. 4). To support schoolchildren educational programs were broadcast day-to-day, an online bank containing educational videos was created and a handbook for schoolchildren was also developed. For children aged between 0 to 13 years old, emergency childcare was provided [6]. At the same time special steps were taken with a view to supporting the effort of teachers in delivering quality education. Teachers were able to participate in regular webinars held by the National Pedagogical Institute [6]. What is more, a special project called the System of Professional Development Support for Teachers and Directors [6] was launched. The project was aimed at providing teachers and principals with useful information on professional development connected with organizing studies remotely.

As far as Slovakia is concerned, after the physical-distancing measures were implemented, academic institutions were closed and remote teaching and learning was provided for the period from 16th March 2020 to 31st May 2020 (CEDEFOP, 2020). School teachers and schoolchildren faced the following difficulties: insufficient access to digital infrastructure, lack of sufficient testing of educational material, lack of technical equipment and poor Internet connectivity [1; 3]. The Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic together

with some non-governmental organization designed a special website for maintaining communication with the public [5]. Developed in the Slovak and Czech languages, the website provides school principals, teachers, parents and schoolchildren with useful educational materials on distance teaching and learning. What is more, the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic developed official guidelines for principals and school teachers on organizing effective teaching and learning remotely.

Conclusions. Taking into consideration the fact that the Covid-19 pandemic became one of the most dangerous challenges to school teachers, schoolchildren and their parents in many countries throughout the world, the study was aimed at investigating the experience of three countries in delivering quality education to schoolchildren. The researchers compared challenges teachers and schoolchildren in Latvia, the Slovak Republic and the Czech Republic faced after the closures of schools and examined good practice of these countries in delivering quality education to schoolchildren amid Covid-19 pandemic. The research demonstrated that schoolteachers and schoolchildren in the countries mentioned above experienced similar problems, namely, poor Internet connection, ineffective interaction between schoolchildren and teachers, teachers' inexperience in delivering education remotely, insufficient level of teachers' and schoolchildren's digital competence etc. Among the best practices used for preventing negative consequences on the systems of general secondary education, developing online platforms and special websites, launching TV programmes and organizing various webinars may be identified.

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