Educational Leadership and Children's Resilience: German and Polish Schools during COVID-19

Paulina BURKOT*, Amy SEPIOŁ & Nataliia DEMESHKANT
Pedagogical University of Cracow, Poland
*paulina.burkot@student.up.krakow.pl

Abstract: As a result of the pandemic, education has moved into virtual space on an unprecedented scale. The purpose of this study was to determine the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on education and to compare the problems and ways of coping with them between Polish and German schools. The study used a qualitative measure, which was realized through telephone interviews with school principals. The received responses have been transcribed and categorized. The final stage was a comparative analysis of the data obtained. The results of the study revealed that the most common problems concerned: the possession and functionality of teaching resources for remote learning (computer equipment, network connection), ensuring the needs of face-to-face relationships (lack of peer meetings and no direct contact with the teacher), mental problems caused by changes in education (depression, anxiety, feelings of stress) in teachers and students. Among the ways schools deal with these problems are leadership role of school leaders (support, staff training, mental support of students and teachers (meetings with pedagogue, school psychologist, conducting remote social meetings with students).

Keywords: Online learning, COVID-19, educational problems

1. Introduction

The pandemic significantly influenced many aspects of people's life, ranging from economic processes to education. In March 2020 governments started implementing certain measures in order to stop spreading the COVID-19 disease by closing schools and switching into online teaching. Education in many countries faced a very difficult challenge to educate the youth from the distance using modern computer technology. The closure of educational establishments has suddenly disrupted the school life of many students and their families which caused long-term consequences regarding social ties and mental health (Rajabi, 2020).

Teachers, who have developed their teaching and training skills based on direct contact with their students inside the classroom throughout the years, had to resign from it and change it into digital technology. Until that time, they had been using it to enrich and diversify the lesson and not as a constant part of the educational process. Studies show that only 15% of Polish teachers had had an experience in distance teaching and 85% had not had any experience in distance teaching before the COVID-19 epidemic started (Buchner et al., 2020). Education has been transformed into an online mode, on an untested and uncommon scale (Burgess et al., 2020).

After the first stage of joy, connected with the announcement of schools' closure, children and teenagers experience many emotions and problems typical for a crisis situation (Pyżalski, 2020). Some students suffer from depression, caused by isolation, loneliness and lack of contact with friends. Younger children have trouble accepting the new situation, they are not able to understand it completely, they are confused and lost. The response to such situation is nonroutine and dependent on many factors, for example affective responsiveness, past experiences, opportunity and ability to use the social support (of family and friends). Children's and teenagers' mechanism of working through the crisis is less developed. Therefore, they belong to a group which is the most vulnerable (Pyżalski, 2020). A vital concern about students' wellbeing was presented in a number of recent studies (Hamilton et al., 2020; Ferri et al., 2020; MacDonald & Hill, 2021). Recent studies highlighted that childhood

education, due to its connection to everyday and real-life experience, as well as children's greater dependence on parents, faces particular challenges when moved online (Spiteri, 2021) and expresses concern about children's socialization (MacDonald and Hill, 2021).

A huge responsibility as well as pressure fell on principals' shoulders. They had to ensure the safety and psychological support of pupils, teachers and change the functioning of educational institutions. Managing crisis and change are now essential skills for a school leader. Running an effective school in challenging times requires more than routine problem solving (Harris, 2020).

School leaders engage in a diverse set of tasks related with teaching, learning, and assessment for promoting students' learning experiences and achievements, promoting and supporting continuous staff development, planning and monitoring available resources (including infrastructure), meeting the external accountability requirements, and cultivating a nurturing school culture with the extended school community (Swan Dagen et al., 2017).

School leadership is considered a core aspect of a successful school improvement across the world, especially in the light of the emerging paradigms of increased school autonomy and accountability (Sergis et al., 2018).

2. Materials and Methods

The survey was conducted at the end of the year 2020 on a group of 26 respondents (German =13, Polish =13), which were principals and managers of primary and secondary schools in Poland and Germany. Participants for interviews were chosen by random selection and their own willingness for the interviews. They were informed that the interview would be recorded and analyzed for scientific purposes. Qualitative measure was used in the study conducted by phone interview with school leaders. The duration of each interview oscillated between 20-30 minutes. The participants' responses were recorded. After all the interviews, the interviews were transcribed and translated into English. A list of codes was then created to match the respondents' responses. When analyzing the results, the most frequently repeated responses were assigned the appropriate code key categories. Each participant answered 12 open questions concerning pandemic risks, methods of preventing and coping with them, as well as the principal's system of work in the difficult pandemic period. These questions focused on three main research questions:
1. What are the risks during the COVID-19 pandemic for students from the perspective of school leaders? Including own resilience.
2. How can school leaders support children's resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic? Learning and teaching issues.
3. What (non-/official) strategies do German and Polish school leaders use in their schools?

According to the research questions above, three leading categories were proposed: Changes in the way of teaching, Student's resilience, and Principal's leadership. The list of subcategories regarding each category was conducted (Table 1 shows categories, subcategories, and examples of answers).

Table 1. *Categories and Codes from Interviews*

Categories	Subcategories	Examples of answers
Changes in the way of teaching	Complexity of new regulations	I like online staff meetings very much. Online meetings are very comfortable. Use technology more often.
	Most challenging part of remote education	Trouble with conducting lessons with students in the classroom and online. Fear of showing one's face to camera. Lack of routine (going to school) generates many behaviors in students.

		Problems with isolation at home. Teachers were not prepared for remote teaching.
	Most frequent problems in remote education	Technological issues. Little visibility of students. Stability of internet connection. Access to laptops. Teachers focusing on other things instead of teaching.
Student's resilience	Coping with stress and problems	Organizing various meetings for staff and students. Talking with each other. Meetings with specialists.
	Supporting students	Helping children integrate. Meetings with specialists. Asking students about their well-being.
Principal's leadership	Decreasing the negative impact of pandemic	Be in touch with parents and students. Meetings with teachers individually. Suggest visiting school and talking with someone or a specialist. Important on focusing on relationships with people.
	Concepts after pandemic	Online meetings are very comfortable. Use technology more often.
	Guidance or regulation from government	Local government did very well- we got what we asked for. It would be perfect to have a calendar when something starts and finishes. We really appreciate funding and teacher training.

The final stage of the study was a comparison of the data obtained and categorized between Polish and German schools, which allowed to determine similarities and indicate differences.

3. Results

For the purposes of this article, our main focus is on three key common themes which were generated from the data with regard to school leadership and children's resilience during remote education. Obtained data was analyzed according to the three main categories in the comparison between Polish and German schools.

Table 2 presents a list of similarities between the two countries in terms of educational challenges, student's resilience and principal's leadership.

Table 2. *List of Similarities between Schools in Poland and Germany*

Categories	Similarities in both countries
Changes in the way of teaching	Technological problems (access to computers, laptops, tablets, the Internet). Lack of adequate preparation of the teaching staff for remote classes. Organization of lessons from the teachers' perspective more difficult and time-consuming.

	Digital fatigue both among students and teachers. Increased contact between teachers and students after lessons.
	A complete change in teaching methods.
Student's resilience	Psychological and emotional problems among many students (depression, anxiety). Initiatives, classes, teacher talks aimed at supporting students.
Principal's leadership	Recognizing the advantages of digital technologies and the willingness to introduce some technological solutions after the pandemic ends. Psychological support for students and school staff by principals. Mutual cooperation between teachers and principals.

The similarities within the 3 major categories were very similar. Many of the educational problems were repeated, regardless of the country. Depending on the school and the country, different methods were developed to solve the problems that occurred. Table 3 lists the opinions of the participants in this study regarding the differences between the countries during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 3. *Summary of Differences between Schools in Poland and German*

Differences in both countries		
Categories	Poland	Germany
Changes in the way of teaching	Average effectiveness of remote education	High effectiveness of remote Education
	Striving to the realization of the core curriculum	Adjusting the teaching content to the realities of the pandemic, flexibility of actions
Student's resilience	Focus on mutual understanding and help	Focus on various sources of stress and problems
Principal's leadership	Support from specialists, pedagogues, psychologists	Relieving the stress level through various types of breathing techniques, mutual conversations
	Expressing a desire for a greater level of autonomy	Balance between the activities of the school principal and ordinances

The analysis of all subcategories related to the category "Changes in the way of teaching" allowed us to assume that teachers in both countries were not prepared to conduct remote lessons. Sudden decisions made by the government caused the increase in frustration because teachers were not able to properly prepare themselves to classes in such a short time. Such lessons required much more effort. Some schools have organized special trainings of how to use different tools in online teaching. However, many teachers had to train on their own how to use modern technology in education, in order to live up to parents' expectations and not to lower the quality of teaching. In Polish schools, there was a strong emphasis put on the realization of the core curriculum to ensure that students were prepared for exams as well as possible. However, in German schools, lessons have been conducted in a more flexible way. The topics were organized in such a way that they could be covered online.

Regarding category "Student's resilience", the educational institutions in both countries have been taking different actions in order to improve students' mental condition. In Polish schools, more emphasis was placed on supporting specialists, for example pedagogues and psychologists. Teachers organized teams to communicate with students. During homeroom hour they tried to talk with students about their well-being and in case of some worrying signals, be ready to provide assistance. On the other hand, in German schools, meditation techniques and breathing exercises have been used to reduce stress levels in students.

Data analysis in the category "Principal's leadership" showed that principals acted on the basis of government regulations, which in the case of Germany were short-term and rapidly transformed, along with the rapidly changing epidemiological situation, which was a major challenge, as well as the source of many frustrations. Spontaneous decisions made by the government decision-makers forced principals to act immediately with the lack of time to prepare reliably for their implementation. In Poland, principals acted in a similar way in implementing the regulations from the Ministry of National Education. Western neighbors had more support in making decisions from teachers, as well as more rules to make work easier. Polish school leaders received support from students' parents and various NGOs. In addition, principals showed a great desire to have greater autonomy. They wanted the government to allow them to decide if they should close the school, because each institution is different and has its own specifics. German principals, on the other hand, would prefer a better balance in terms of government regulations and their own decisions. In both countries, most schools had mutual cooperation and communication between educational institutions.

4. Discussion

Teachers not only in Poland and Germany, but also in most countries, were not prepared for such a sudden change in education, both in terms of mental, technological and methodical preparation. Teachers have taken the trouble to transfer teaching content and materials to virtual space and to acquire competences in using the necessary software (Allen et al., 2020). The pandemic has shown what the consequences will be if schools do not keep up with the fundamental process of ICT transformation. It will therefore be crucial to provide teachers with opportunities for professional development and training for future teachers (Daniel, 2020). The most common factors limiting remote education were concerns about ensuring fair teaching for all students, hardware shortages among students, and the lack of internet access (Hamilton, 2020).

Our research on educational leadership and psychological resilience of students in schools in Poland and Germany has shown that the pandemic has clearly had an impact on the mental health of pupils in both countries. Previous studies confirmed that outbreaks of infectious diseases have a negative impact on the health and mental condition of the society (Sim et al., 2010). Children and adolescents are more susceptible to the psychological effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, they tend to show more negative psychological effects, so they need psychological support from three cooperating systems: the social system, the school system and the family system (Zhou, 2020). Recent study stressed on significant psychological problems of older children and teenagers as a result of imposed social isolation. There has been a development of anxiety, fear, somatic symptoms, sleep disorders, depression, feelings of anger and irritability, regret and loss, as well as post-traumatic stress (Esposito et al., 2021). Our results were almost identical. Students often pointed out how much they longed to meet their friends and teachers (Ewing et al., 2021). Our results showed that most schools have taken initiatives to support pupils during isolation by organizing special meetings for students, usually during the homeroom hours, but not only. Almost all teachers kept in touch with students and their parents (König et al., 2020).

Trust has been identified as a key measure of crisis leadership effectiveness. It requires authenticity and honesty on the part of the leader (Schoenberg, 2005). In addition, the pace of change in this pandemic is unprecedented, so school leaders will need to be involved in ongoing crisis and change management, which will require support and collaboration from all staff (Harris, 2020).

5. Conclusion

The results of the study made it clear that, regardless of the country during the COVID-19 pandemic, there were many similarities in the problems related to remote education, teacher preparation for online classes, mutual cooperation, and the deterioration of the well-being of pupils in both countries due to isolation. At the same time, some differences have been revealed between schools in Poland and Germany concerning, among others, the evaluation of remote education, the realization of the content of the core curriculum, as well as the sources of support for school principals at this difficult time.

References

Allen J., Rowan L., Singh P. (2020). Teaching and teacher education in the time of COVID-19. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education* Volume 48, 2020. https://doi.org/10.1080/1359866X.2020.1752051

Buchner A., Wierzbicka M. (2020). Edukacja zdalna w czasie pandemii. Edycja II. Centrum Cyfrowe, https://centrumcyfrowe.pl/wp-content/uploads/sites/16/2020/11/Raport_Edukacja-zdalna-w-czasie-pandemii.-Edycja-II.pdf.

Burgess, S. and Sievertsen, H. (2020). Schools, Skills, and Learning: The Impact of COVID-19 on Education.

conversation with Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke about thematic analysis. Qualitative Research in

Daniel S. J. (2020). Education and the COVID-19 pandemic. Prospects, 1–6. *Advance online publication*. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11125-020-09464-3

Esposito, S., Giannitto, N., Squarcia, A., Neglia, C., Argentiero, A., Minichetti, P., Cotugno, N., & Principi, N. (2021). Development of Psychological Problems Among Adolescents During School Closures Because of the COVID-19 Lockdown Phase in Italy: *A Cross-Sectional Survey. Frontiers in pediatrics*, 8, 628072. https://doi.org/10.3389/fped.2020.628072

Ewing, L. A., Cooper, H. B. (2021). Technology-enabled remote learning during COVID-19: perspectives of Australian teachers, students and parents, Technology, Pedagogy and Education, DOI: 10.1080/1475939X.2020.1868562

Ferri, F., Grifoni, P., & Guzzo, T. (2020). Online Learning and Emergency Remote Teaching: Opportunities and Challenges in Emergency. Situations. Societies 2020, 10, 86.

Hamilton, L.S.; Kaufman, J.H.; Diliberti, M. Teaching and Leading through a Pandemic: Key Findings from the American Educator Panels. Spring 2020 COVID-19 Surveys; RAND Corporation: Santa Monica, CA, USA, 2020.

Harris A., Jones M. (2020) COVID 19 – school leadership in disruptive times, School Leadership & Management, 40:4, 243-247, DOI: 10.1080/13632434.2020.1811479.

König, J., Jäger-Biela, D.J., & Glutsch, N. (2020). Adapting to online teaching during COVID-19 school closure: teacher education and teacher competence effects among early career teachers in Germany. *European Journal of Teacher Education*, 43, 608 - 622.

MacDonald, M.; Hill, C. The Educational Impact of the Covid-19 Rapid Response on Teachers, Students, and Families: Insights from British Columbia, Canada. Prospects 2021.

Psychology 1–22. DOI: 10.1080/14780887.2019.1670765.

Pyżalski, J. (red.) (2020). Edukacja w czasach pandemii wirusa COVID-19. Z dystansem o tym, co robimy obecnie jako nauczyciele. *Warszawa: EduAkcja*.

Rajabi, M. (2020). Mental health problems amongst school-age children and adolescents during the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK, Ireland and Iran: A call to action and research. *Health Promotion Perspectives*, 10(4), 293-294.

Schoenberg, A. (2005). Do crisis plans matter? A new perspective on leading during a crisis. Public Relations Quarterly, 50(1), 2–6.

Sergis, S., Voziki, T., & Sampson, D. (2018). School leadership: An analysis of competence frameworks. In Digital Technologies: Sustainable Innovations for Improving Teaching and Learning (pp. 3-25). Springer, Cham.

Sim, K., Huak Chan, Y., Chong, P. N., Chua, H. C., & Wen Soon, S. (2010). Psychosocial and coping responses within the community health care setting towards a national outbreak of an infectious disease. *Journal of psychosomatic research*, 68(2), 195–202. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpsychores.2009.04.004

Spiteri, J. (2021). Quality Early Childhood Education for All and the Covid-19 Crisis: A Viewpoint. Prospects. Swan Dagen A., Morewood A., & Smith M. L. (2017). Teacher leader model standards and the functions assumed by National Board Certified teachers. In The Educational Forum (Vol. 81, No. 3, pp. 322-338). Routledge.

Zhou X. (2020). Managing psychological distress in children and adolescents following the COVID-19 epidemic: A cooperative approach. Psychological trauma: theory, research, practice and policy, 12(S1), S76–S78. https://doi.org/10.1037/tra0000754