



Monika Skura

Poland

Anna Steinhausen

Poland

I Can See Positive Aspects of Online Education. Educators' Well-Being and Challenges Faced During the COVID-19 Pandemic

DOI: 10.15804/tner.2022.68.2.19

Abstract

The emergence and rapid spread of SARS-CoV-2 caused uncertainty about our health, jobs, and the education system. For teachers, changes in workplaces and the breakdown of interpersonal relationships during the pandemic caused even greater stress levels in what is already known to be a stressful job. We wanted to find out if a positive or negative attitude towards online work influenced levels of stress and mental well-being, perceived difficulties at work, subjective evaluation of received support, and effectiveness of remote work during the first wave of SARS-CoV-2 in Poland. Data was collected using a questionnaire, the PSS 10 scale and another scale based on GHQ12 and GH30. Nearly one-third of the respondents indicated positive aspects of online education. Those who could see the positive aspects of online education showed themselves better adapted to the new form of working and had higher results in all four scales that we researched. They handled online tools, used synchronous methods, conducted educational activities more often, and felt competent during online work. Supporting the effectiveness of educators by improving the competencies that they need for this new form of working is vital with regard to the changes within the school institution.

Keywords: *COVID-19, lockdown, teachers' stress, teachers' mental well-being, school specialists, specialist counsellor*

Introduction

Closing schools in March, aimed at keeping teachers, children and school staff safe from its little-known effects, was sudden and unprecedented. Globally, these decisions affected 1.5 billion students (UNESCO, 2020). Very often, teachers, students and their parents had only a few days to switch to online work. Not many of them had earlier obtained the necessary technical and pedagogical skills to integrate digital technology instruction (Schleicher, 2020). Petrie et al. (2020) list additional stressors caused by remote work, i.e., lacking in competence using technology, working with students feeling anxious about the schools closing, the need to balance remote work with supporting their own children learning at home and maintaining positive relationships with students and their parents, which is problematic when working online. Research shows that teachers are prone to stress when working under pressure and feeling a lack of support (Travers & Cooper, 1996).

Even before the pandemic, teaching has often been regarded as one of the most demanding jobs (Johnson et al., 2005). Due to the pandemic, teachers had to adapt to new pedagogical models of delivering knowledge for which they might not have been trained. Teachers, who were familiar with online tools, could regard the remote work situation as a positive or insignificant modification, as opposed to the individuals having no appropriate competencies, who viewed it as a burden (Quezada et al., 2019), which could result in decreased emotional well-being (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2018). In order to understand the psychological and professional consequences of the educational ecosystem's crisis caused by the pandemic, it is worth knowing the correlation between teachers' professional resources, their well-being, perceived stress and burnout, and resilience as well as the ability to cope with adversities (Holmes, 2020).

The Situation of Polish Schools During the First Period of the Epidemic

The spring outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic forced the closure of Polish schools for 1.2 million pupils from pre-primary schools, 2.3 million from primary schools, 2.4 from secondary schools and 1.6 from tertiary schools (The World Bank, 2020). On March 12, after announcing the national lockdown, didactic activities in educational institutions, both public and private, were suspended. On March 25, the schools started online classes, but neither the students nor the teachers were prepared for this form of work. Reports on online learning conditions in Poland have shown that, similarly to other countries (Bol, 2020; Goetz, 2020), one of the most important problems was providing all students with instruction,

hampered by the low socio-economic status of the families and lack of support from educational authorities (Rzecznik Praw Obywatelskich, 2020). Moreover, spending many hours at the computer caused „mental and physical problems”, „difficulty falling asleep, lack of energy, nervousness or bad mood”.

Teachers and Specialists Employed in Polish Educational Institutions

There are several types of schools in Poland: mainstream schools providing inclusive education, mainstream schools with special classes, integration classes in mainstream schools or integrated education schools consisting exclusively of integrative classes and special schools. There are also educators, psychologists, special educators, and pedagogical speech and music therapists in Polish schools. Their task is to support teachers in diagnosing students' developmental needs, providing psychological and pedagogical help to pupils and parents, conducting prophylactic and therapeutic meetings, and developing students' skills. The Polish educational system also involves pedagogical and psychological counselling centres. They employ psychologists, educators, speech therapists, pedagogical therapists, psychotherapists, and social therapists. Their role is to provide support to kindergartens and schools in implementing educational and care tasks (Journal of Laws of 2017, item 59).

The Present Study

The study aimed to compare the level of functioning among the teachers and specialists who had a positive approach toward online education during the first wave of the pandemic with those who had a negative approach. None of the study participants had any previous experience in working online. We intended to determine if the approach towards online work influences the levels of stress and mental well-being, perceived difficulties at work, subjective evaluation of received support, and effectiveness of remote work. Positive or negative approaches toward work arrangements might affect teachers' performance who had a sense of danger and fear of the unknown during the first months of the pandemic. It might trigger decreased mental functioning but could also result in mastering a new personal and professional competence.

Method

Participants

The research was carried out on a group of 453 teachers and specialists aged 23 to 67 ($M = 44.30$; $SD = 9.92$) and included 402 women (88.7%) and 51 men (11.3%). The participants were divided into two groups according to their approach to off-site education. The group with a positive approach towards new forms of work consisted of 158 persons (34.9%), and a negative approach was exhibited by 295 persons (65.1%).

Procedure

The study lasted from the beginning of May 2020 until the end of educational activities in Polish schools. All institutions were located in the Mazowieckie province. The sampling was taken in two randomly selected two districts.

The study was conducted remotely, with the consent of the headmaster of each institution. Each respondent was informed about the purpose of the study. The study was anonymous, did not include the collection of sensitive data about teachers or students, and was in line with the procedures for conducting academic research in an educational institution. Each participant's identity and questionnaire were encoded for report preparation and subsequent scientific publication.

Research Instruments

The questionnaire consisted of four scales and questions concerning remote work. The research group was divided based on the main thesis statement: *I can see positive aspects of online education*.

The first scale was applied to the level of stress and was examined with the Polish *PSS 10 Scale* (Jurczyński & Ogińska-Bulik, 2009), slightly modified. Internal consistency was high, $\alpha = 0,85$.

Another *scale* assessed *mental well-being* and was created for this study based on GHQ12 and GH30 questionnaires (Golberg & Williams, 1991). The applied tool used all the questions from GHQ 12 and the questions regarding anxiety and depression from GHQ 30. It examined the occurrence of symptoms of mental dysfunctions (e.g., sleep disorder, fatigue, difficulty in focusing) and took into account the severity of symptoms connected with the epidemic. The new tool was made up of 18 items forming a single scale and, similarly to the original GHQ scale results, higher scores indicated a lower level of mental well-being. The internal consistency was very high, $\alpha = 0,94$.

The scale of perceived difficulties in performing remote work was also created for the study. It comprises 25 items with high internal consistency, $\alpha = 0,91$. The difficulties included in the scale concerned the availability of hardware and software, educational problems, teachers' and students' working conditions, their motivation and emotional state, preparation for classes and requirements of parents and headmasters.

The final *scale of evaluation of received social support* (family, relatives, colleagues) and professional assistance (specialists, principals, educational institutions and pupils' parents). The total score consisted of seven items. The level of internal consistency was adequate, $\alpha = 0,79$, and the higher the result, the lower the scoring.

The other variables – professional tasks related to online work, evaluation of one's own effectiveness, and work planning – were examined using specific items. In the case of the first variable, we asked about the method of conducting classes and the form of remote work. The second concerned the teachers' duties, meeting the pupils' emotional needs and managing online work.

Statistical Analysis

In order to address the research questions, the IBM SPSS Statistics 25 software was used. The basic descriptive statistics analyses were calculated with the Kolmogorov-Smirnow test, *t* Student's test for independent samples, *U* Mann-Whitney's tests, and the χ^2 tests. We used the alpha value threshold of .05 ($p < .05$).

Results

Positive Aspects of Online Work and the Teachers & Specialists' Performance

Stress level, mental well-being, perceived difficulties at work and evaluation of received support

In the following analysis, we performed the Student *t*-test for independent samples to determine whether stress levels are different in workers who can or cannot see positive aspects of remote teaching (Table 1).

Lower stress levels were found in people who can see positive aspects of online work. Their mental well-being was better. They perceived fewer difficulties at work and assessed the received social support to be higher than the participants who saw no positive aspects of the off-site work. We found a statistically significant difference; the effect was small.

Professional tasks related to remote work

We performed many χ^2 tests to determine whether finding positive aspects of remote work is connected with the frequency of undertaking professional tasks related to remote work. We found three statistically significant differences in the statements *I run online lessons, classes, and therapy with the class (group of children) via online platforms in real-time*, *I run online workshops and training via online platforms in real-time*, and *I am in constant contact with the parents of the student* (Table 2). Participants who could see a positive side to remote teaching had more frequent activity in the mentioned area. The effect size was small.

Evaluation of one's own remote work

We performed many χ^2 tests to determine whether the evaluation of one's own online work differed in the compared groups. All the results were statistically significant. Participants, who saw positive aspects of remote teaching, answered "Yes" more often. The size effect for the first two items was small, and for the third one moderate (Table 3).

Discussion

We intended to determine whether there were differences in the level of functioning among the employees of the Polish educational institutions, depending on their approach to the online form of education. In these analyses, we took into account: stress level, mental well-being, experienced difficulties, perceived support, professional tasks and self-evaluation of the educators' own effectiveness. The investigation proved that nearly one-third of teachers and specialists recognised positive aspects of online education. However, it should be noted that the majority of the respondents' approach toward the new form of work was negative, or they had no opinion on that matter.

Initially, we compared the level of stress and mental well-being. The discrepancy between the groups with respect to the scales showed that the group which indicated a positive approach to online education had lower levels of stress and fewer symptoms of psychological dysfunction (sleep disorder, fatigue, difficulty in focusing). We can assume that the respondents with a positive approach to remote work were performing better in the situation caused by the pandemic. According to the authors (Bottiani et al., 2019; Dunham, 1992), the level of stress experienced by a teacher in a given situation depends on estimated demands and efficient management strategies. Teachers are more susceptible to stress during

online work when they do not feel supported (Pithers & Soden, 1998; Travers & Cooper, 1996) and are forced to employ technology they do not feel sufficiently competent to use (Al-Fudail & Mellar, 2008). The respondents with a positive approach to online education were more resilient when facing adversities, which eased effectiveness despite unfavourable circumstances (Masten, 2001).

When constructing the measure of perceived difficulties during remote work, we planned to identify the scale of problems the respondents met when tackling equipment and software, fulfilling requirements, remote working conditions, motivation and emotional state, and expectations of parents, pupils and superiors. Comparably to other studies (See et al., 2020; Flack et al., 2020; Bol, 2020; Klapproth et al., 2020), the teachers and specialists pointed to problems concerning remote learning, but we noticed the difference between groups having similar experiences in the situation of the pandemic. Those with positive approaches saw fewer obstacles in remote work, treating new circumstances as a challenge that might facilitate their professional development.

The scale of support was expected to verify if the respondents had adequate assistance from their families, colleagues, specialists, educational institutions, and pupils' parents. Similar issues have been already discussed in numerous papers (Klapproth et al., 2020; Kim & Asbury, 2020; See et al., 2020; Flack et al., 2020). Dividing the participants according to their approach showed that the group demonstrating enthusiasm towards online education rated the received support higher. Previous analysis has shown they had lower stress levels and improved mental well-being. Therefore, they would have only a limited need for support, or their personal and professional needs would be better satisfied.

The groups were also compared regarding the professional activities connected with distance working. The synchronous lessons and online workshops were conducted more often by the participants declaring a positive approach. They adopted teaching tools and conducted lessons and workshops similar to on-site activities instead of sending previously prepared recordings or resources for unassisted learning. However, replaying materials once prepared by teachers can facilitate learning and reduce teachers' excessive workload (Nicol et al., 2003). Some researchers (Kennedy & Archambault, 2012) favour training programmes which allow for online teaching activities and compare the effectiveness of in-person and online classes, stating that pupils' results are similar (Ni, 2013). Still, the majority notices the advantages and drawbacks of online learning. Hampered social interactions are perceived as the main obstacle in off-site education (Nicol et al., 2003) and can negatively affect students' well-being, which leads to learning loss (Jones et al., 2019).

The last phase of our analysis was meant to test how the teachers and specialists supporting their educational goals evaluate the effectiveness of their own remote work within their main scope of responsibilities, i.e., didactic and educational tasks and taking care of the learners' emotional needs. Compared results have shown that more respondents with a positive approach towards online education stated they implemented their didactic goals to the same extent as in the classroom. The level of emotional support was assessed likewise. It may be assumed that the educators with a positive approach to online work are more convinced that the new form of work allows for executing their teaching objectives and adapting classroom pedagogy in the digital environment (Flack et al., 2020). It is strongly suggested by the last analysis in which the participants assessed if they were doing well at online work. The results showed a statistically significant difference: more respondents with a positive approach toward online education considered themselves effective when working off-site. As the study of König, Jäger-Biela, and Glutsch (2020) shows, digital competencies and perceived self-efficacy play a key role in adapting to teaching online during a school closure caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Conclusions

Although all the educators' situation was similar at the beginning of the lockdown, and they had no previous experience in remote work, some assessed online education positively. The approach toward a way of work indicates substantial differences in performance between the examined groups. Those who could see positive aspects of online education showed better adaptation to the new forms of work on all scales. Moreover, the analysis confirmed previous assumptions that those with a positive approach handled online tools (e.g., teleconference), used synchronous methods and conducted educational activities more often, and felt competent during online work.

Acknowledgements

The researchers would like to express their appreciation to Katarzyna Skarzyńska for her support in conducting the study.

References

- Al-Fudail, M., & Mellar, H. (2008). Investigating teacher stress when using technology. *Computer & Education*, 51, 1103–1110. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2007.11.004>
- Bol, T. (2020). *Inequality in homeschooling during the Corona crisis in the Netherlands. First results from the LISS Panel.* (Working Paper). <https://doi.org/10.31235/osf.io/hf32q>
- Bottiani, J. H. et al. (2019). Teacher stress and burnout in urban middle schools: Associations with job demands, resources, and effective classroom practices. *Journal of School Psychology*, 77, 36e51. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jsp.2019.10.002>
- Dunham, J. (1992). *Stress in teaching*. Routledge.
- Flack, C. B. et al. (2020). *Educator perspectives on the impact of COVID-19 on teaching and learning in Australia and New Zealand*. Melbourne. Pivot Professional Learning.
- Goetz, M. (2020). Distance Learning in der COVID-19 Krise: Ein Praxischeck. *Medienimpulse*, 58, 1–21. <https://doi.org/doi:10.21243/mi-02-20-19>
- Golberg, D., & Williams, P. (1991). *A user's guide to the General Health Questionnaire*. NFER-NELSON.
- Holmes, K. (2020). *Sustaining learning communities through and beyond COVID-19*. UNESCO Futures of Education Ideas LAB. <https://en.unesco.org/futuresofeducation/holmes-sustaining-learning-communities-COVID-19>
- Johnson, S. et al. (2005). The experience of work-related stress across occupations. *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, 20(2), 178–187. <https://doi.org/10.1108/02683940510579803>
- Jones, E., Samra, R., & Lucassen, M. (2019). The world at their fingertips? The mental of online distance-based law students. *Law Teacher*, 53(1), 49–69.
- Journal of Laws of 2017, item 59, Dz. U. 2017, item 59. <https://isap.sejm.gov.pl/isap.nsf/download.xsp/WDU20170000059/U/D20170059Lj.pdf>
- Jurczyński, Z., & Ogińska-Bulik, N. (2009). *Narzędzia pomiaru stresu i radzenia sobie ze stresem*. [Tools for measuring stress and coping with stress]. Pracownia Testów Psychologicznych.
- Kennedy, K., & Archambault, L. (2012). Design and Development of Field Experiences in K-12 Online Learning Environments, *The Journal of Applied Instructional Design*, 2(1), 35–49.
- Kim, L. E., & Asbury, K. (2020). 'Like a rug had been pulled from under you': The impact of COVID-19 on teachers in England during the first six weeks of the UK lockdown. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 90, 1062–1083. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjep.12381>
- Klapproth, F. et al. (2020). Teachers' experiences of stress and their coping strategies during COVID-19 induced distance teaching. *Journal of Pedagogical Research* <http://dx.doi.org/10.33902/JPR.2020062805>
- König, J., Jäger-Biela, D., & 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(4), 608–622. DOI: 10.1080/02619768.2020.1809650
- Masten, A. (2001). Ordinary magic: Resilience processes in development. *American Psychologist*, 56, 227–238.

- Mercer, S., & Gregersen, T. (2020). *Teacher wellbeing*. Oxford.
- Ni, A. (2013). Comparing the effectiveness of classroom and online learning: Teaching research methods. *Journal of Public Affairs Education*, 19(2), 199–215. doi.org/10.1080/15236803.2013.12001730
- Nicol, D., Minty, I., & Sinclair, Ch. (2003). The social dimensions of online learning. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 40(3), 270–280. DOI:10.1080/1470329032000103807
- Petrie, C. et al. (2020). Spotlight: Quality education for all during Covid-19 crisis. In Ch. Petrie et al., *Spotlight: Quality education for all during Covid-19 crisis*. OECD/Hundred Research Report. https://hundred-cdn.s3.amazonaws.com/uploads/report/file/15/hundred_spotlight_covid-19_digital.pdf
- Pithers, R. T., & Soden, R. (1998). Scottish and Australian teacher stress and strain: A comparative study. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 68, 269–279. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2044-8279.1998.tb01289.x>
- Quezada, R. L., Talbot, C., & Quezada-Parker, K. B. (2020). From bricks and mortar to remote teaching: a teacher education programmes' response to Covid 19. *Journal of Education for Teaching*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02607476.2020.1801330>
- Rzecznik Praw Obywatelskich. (2020). *Debata: jak przetrwać w szkole w dobie pandemii?* [Debate: how to survive at school in the age of the pandemic?]. <https://www.rpo.gov.pl/pl/content/debata-jak-przetrwac-w-szkole-w-dobie-pandemii>
- Schleicher, A. (2020). Education disrupted – education rebuilt. In Ch. Petrie et al., *Spotlight: Quality education for all during Covid-19 crisis*. https://cdn.hundred.org/uploads/report/file/15/hundred_spotlight_covid-19_digital.pdf
- See, B., Wardle, L., & Collie, P. (2020). *Teachers' wellbeing and workload during Covid-19 lockdown*. Working Paper. Durham University Evidence Centre for Education and Schoolzone.
- Skaalvik, E. M., & Skaalvik, S. (2018). Job demands and job resources as predictors of teachers' motivation and well-being. *Social Psychology of Education*, 21, 1251–1275. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11218-018-9464-8>
- The World Bank. (2020). *World Bank Education and COVID-19*. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/data/interactive/2020/03/24/world-bank-education-and-covid-19>
- Travers, C. J., & Cooper, C. L. (1996). *Teachers under pressure*. Routledge.
- UNESCO. (2020). *COVID-19 Educational Disruption and Response*. <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse>