EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGES OF EMERGENCY REMOTE TEACHING AND LEARNING DURING THE CORONAVIRUS CRISIS

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Abstract

The coronavirus pandemic rapidly spread around the world and made people face numerous difficulties and challenges in various aspects of human activity, including education. To be able to protect their citizens from this health threat, governments across the world often had to act drastically. Preventive measures that were taken by the Croatian government, as well as others worldwide, involved closing educational institutions. In other words, classroom education was replaced by emergency remote teaching. This adjustment brought along numerous challenges and left many teachers unprepared. Based on available literature, this paper provides an overview of challenges which both teachers and students are met with. In addition, it offers guidelines for improving the educational process, under the given circumstances, directing it towards the student's overall development, having their interests and needs in mind. Difficulties teachers face relate to their digital competence and using information and communication technology (ICT), lesson planning and creating teaching materials, giving assignments and evaluating student progress, encouraging student self-education, but also their personal challenges. Difficulties students deal with involve taking online classes, acquiring knowledge, and maintaining good mental health. The fact that the learning process largely depends on the student's emotional state highlighted the teacher's role in the student's overall development. This means that teachers have to provide a positive and supportive atmosphere in the online environment. With its critical overview of the educational challenges both teachers and students face during the coronavirus crisis, this paper contributes to a wider understanding of said difficulties which provides support for further research.

Keywords: challenges, coronavirus crisis, education, emergency remote teaching, learning, teacher-student relationship.

1 INTRODUCTION

According to the announcement of the Croatian Institute of Public Health (CIPH) (February 2nd 2020), the coronavirus disease, named COVID-19, is a new and unknown disease. Reportedly, the virus is of animal origin and is transmitted through close contact among humans which makes it difficult to prevent from spreading. CIPH states that the most common symptoms of the new coronavirus disease are a fever, cough, and difficulty breathing, making it almost impossible to differentiate from the common cold. The virus, that originated in China, lead to a pandemic that quickly spread worldwide. The rapid spread of the virus left

many feeling nervous, anxious, insecure, and scared due to a large number of deaths. As a consequence of this situation, governments around the world were forced to react, frequently and drastically, in order to protect their citizens. New precautionary measures brought by governments, including the Croatian government, had an immense impact on many aspects of human activity, including economy, health care, politics, and, consequently, education. This was confirmed by Opić (2020), Dean of the Faculty of Teacher Education in Zagreb, who stated that the transition from classroom teaching to remote teaching challenges the developmental aspect of educating students. Nevertheless, this transition, as a temporary replacement for classroom teaching, needs to be made separate from online or distance education.

As an urgent solution to the coronavirus crisis and the closing of schools, governments introduced Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) (Hodges et al., 2020) as an obligation, "that arises out of necessity and with necessary haste." (Bozkurt et al., 2020, p. 11) It was crucial for survival in a time of crisis with all resources available (ibid). In other words, it was a temporary shift of instructional delivery to an alternate delivery mode due to crisis circumstances. It involves the use of fully remote teaching solutions for instruction or education that would otherwise be delivered face-to-face or as blended or hybrid courses and that will return to that format once the crisis or emergency has abated. The primary objective in these circumstances is not to re-create a robust educational ecosystem but rather to provide temporary access to instruction and instructional supports in a manner that is quick to set up and is reliably available during an emergency or crisis. (Hodges et al., 2020)

On the other hand, online education includes activities for students that have been thoroughly thought through (ibid) and founded on theoretical and practical knowledge which is specific to its field (Bozkurt et al., 2020). Those activities provide students with varied opportunities and enable them to be actively engaged, responsible, and flexible (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020), which is why online education is much more than uploading educational content. It is important to differentiate ERT from online education because the experience teachers acquire during the coronavirus crisis will certainly have an impact on their attitude towards online and distance education which will play an important role in positioning it in a post-COVID world. (ibid)

Only when the difference between ERT and online education is recognized can we understand the challenges that ERT brought about. Hodges et al. (2020) emphasize that hastily implementing ERT can diminish the quality of the courses delivered because creating and organizing online courses is a process that can last for months. The authors warn that "online courses created in this way should not be mistaken for long-term solutions but accepted as a temporary solution to an immediate problem." (ibid) Having that in mind, it is possible to conclude that closing educational institutions leads to challenges and difficulties not only for teachers, but for students as well, due to the urgent adaptation process they have to go through to get used to the alternative learning process. The mentioned challenges and difficulties will be systematically presented and analyzed in this paper by the end of which guidelines to managing them will be given.

2 EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGES OF EMERGENCY REMOTE TEACHING AND LEARNING

2.1 Educational Challenges for Teachers

Looking at the pandemic from an educational point of view and having in mind which measures had to be taken to respond to the numerous challenges it brought about, it was proven that the key role of teachers was in creating a safe and flexible learning environment. The transition from classroom teaching to Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT), as a necessary precaution to enable the continuation of the educational process during the COVID-19 pandemic, demanded fast adaptation from teachers. This abrupt change left many teachers unprepared making it difficult for them to cope at the beginning, which was reflected on their work. Teachers were faced with pedagogical, didactic, and methodical challenges in planning and implementing the educational process, student evaluation, and usage of technology which highlighted their digital competence. Subsequently, these challenges lead to many others that were of personal nature.

The first and biggest challenge teachers came up against was linked to the usage of technology. Despite their positive attitude and motivation concerning the transition to remote teaching, teachers felt hindered by the lack of necessary equipment and resources (Lapada et al., 2020, Portillo et al., 2020). The usage of technology and teaching methods aimed at achieving effective learning varied and depended on may factors (Duraku et al., 2020). The effectiveness of teaching depended on the knowledge and skills of teachers concerning the use of technology, the availability and access to technology, as well as on their isolation at home. According to the UNESCO report (March, 2020), this was especially visible in countries in which

technology wasn't used as a teaching tool before the coronavirus crisis. The newest TALIS analysis showed that teachers don't feel competent enough to support their students when using digital technology nor do they feel able to motivate them to be actively engaged during online classes (TALIS, 2019). With that, the lack and/or inadequacy of digital technology was highlighted as the 4th biggest issue in countries that participated in the survey (28%), and the 5th biggest issue in the EU (27%). (TALIS, 2019) The mentioned issues demonstrate that even the first step of ERT implementation was problematic for teachers who were put in a difficult position that lead to various challenges and great responsibility. To achieve positive results, it was necessary to understand the interaction between students, teachers, and technology (Duraku et al., 2020).

Teachers faced a number of didactic and methodical challenges in order to direct their teaching towards their students' needs. From a didactic and methodical standpoint, the need for active learning has been brought into the spotlight during the coronavirus crisis. This is not new information because active learning has been in focus of contemporary education even before the crisis. Even though active learning approaches aren't unknown, they have been put in different context with which teachers are supposed to cope successfully and not let a single student be left behind. Didactic and methodical challenges take the curricular approach to learning into account, requiring a reorganization and adaptation of the curriculum which includes: adjustment of learning outcomes, usage of innovative and collaborative strategies and methods, adaptation of course content and student evaluation. Learning outcomes greatly depended on how digital technology and its possibilities were utilized by teachers and students. Teaching strategies and methods required modification to fit in the virtual environment and to adhere to the students' needs and abilities, which was highlighted by differences in socioeconomic status of students (Huang et al., 2020). Therefore, changes had to be made in the fundamental components of the curriculum during the periods of planning, implementation, and evaluation of the learning process. This was proven to be an additional challenge for teachers which was made difficult by the lack of time to prepare – curriculum content wasn't adapted for the virtual environment and it takes up a considerable amount of time to do so (Huang et al., 2020). It was important for teachers to be flexible when it came to the teaching-learning process (Duraku et al., 2020, Huang et al., 2020).

Lundin (1999) emphasizes the student-centered approach as the key component of flexible learning. This approach enables information being shared between teachers and students, as well as among students, by adapting teaching methods and the curriculum to conform to the students' needs (Haleemunissa et al., 2021). It requires interweaving different pedagogical strategies and various learning styles. In addition, students should be able to choose their own learning style that will best suit their needs, as well as the context and circumstances in which they live. It is important to consider that there is a number of modalities of flexible learning (Lundin, 1999) because its elements adapt to different contexts. This is connected to one of the essential tasks that teachers had during times of uncertainty – not to allow students' learning be disrupted and making sure that the learning process remains the best it can be. The difficult circumstances lead to the challenging task of creating equal opportunities and learning possibilities for all students. It is questionable if teachers had the adequate support and necessary tools to modify educational aims and outcomes (Popa, 2020). To help them overcome the issue of limited time for preparing content for online teaching, the teachers were given access to open educational resources (Huang et al., 2020). They used numerous alternatives in order to cope with ERT challenges, including various applications and platforms that aid online learning, such as: Zoom, Google Meet, Microsoft Teams, compilations of varied assignments, posting teaching materials to Google Classroom, YouTube, Moodle, communicating with parents and students through Viber and WhatsApp (Duraku et al., 2020, Rasmitadila et al., 2020). A combination of synchronous and asynchronous communication contributed to flexible learning in ERT. Asynchronous learning amplifies teacher and student adaptability and enables the freedom to access information and materials at any time, which was proven to be a fundamental requirement in crisis situations. Teachers have more time for creating learning materials and assignments, as well as giving feedback to students. Daniel (2020) states that asynchronous learning functions best in the digital environment where materials don't have to be posted in real time but can be scheduled for a time visible to students. Also, communication can be achieved in different ways, e.g. through Moodle, e-mail, etc. Teachers can periodically check the students' involvement and plan individual meetings with students who need additional help. That way, stress and exhaustion can be relieved for both students and teachers, which is of considerable significance for maintaining good mental health and preventing burnout.

The mentioned didactic and methodical challenges are linked to the students' motivation to learn. Therefore, a need for effective and creative pedagogical approaches, which will keep students motivated and actively engaged during ERT, became apparent. This was proven by studies that revealed that the student dropout rate was high during the implementation of distance learning (Huang et al., 2020). A research conducted by

Rasmitadila et al. (2020) showed that students were motivated to learn at the beginning, although, two months after, their enthusiasm and aspiration declined leaving them bored. Adequate pedagogical approaches that take the given situation into consideration can help maintain active learning. This includes giving students problem-solving assignments, writing reports, or researching varied topics. The importance of mental health was put into focus when it came to changing the curriculum (Haleemunissa et al., 2021).

Evaluating student progress was another part of the educational process that had to be adjusted to the given situation. Research shows that this was one of the biggest challenges teachers had to face (Sablić et al., 2020, Sintema, 2020, Asanov et al., 2021). For instance, a Croatian study conducted by Sablić et al. (2020) revealed that 95% of participants expected instructions from the Ministry of Education for evaluating and grading student work, which demonstrates the severity of the issue. Teachers were worried that they will overwhelm their students and were questioning the evaluation of the work students have done so far (Asanov et al., 2021). They tried combining different methods which included oral evaluation, projects and research assignments, and, most frequently, homework evaluation (Duraku et al., 2020, Asanov et al., 2021). Teachers emphasized difficulties with the evaluation of student involvement considering: interaction with students in different subjects, the issue of inadequate evaluation alternatives when classes organized via public TV were in question, the pairing of technology and individual needs of students, and ERT learning methods for students with special needs (Duraku et al., 2020). Problems concerning the evaluation of student progress involve equal assessment of cognitive, affective, and psychomotor aspects of the virtual environment. Teachers highlighted the issue with evaluating the cognitive aspect due to parent involvement during virtual examinations. The issue with the affective aspect was visible in diverse views on ERT where the parents' influence was also present (Rasmitadila et al., 2020).

Problems such as isolation, lack of experience in remote teaching, inadequate levels of digital competence, absence of clear instructions and cooperation, etc. lead to numerous challenges for teachers. Their main role was helping students cope with traumatic experiences (Haleemunissa et al., 2021). The transition to ERT and circumstances caused by COVID-19 increased stress levels and anxiety for teachers around the world (UNESCO, 2020) making them come out of their comfort zone and leaving them feeling insecure, confused, tired, and mentally drained (Duraku et al., 2020). Their motivation, as well as the students' motivation, declined with time. After three months of ERT, they were searching for additional incentives and advice to be able to carry out their duties by the end of the semester (Rasmitadila et al., 2020). Given the challenges that were put in front of them, teachers shouldn't have to feel like they are left to their own devices in organizing and implementing the teaching-learning process (Huang et al., 2020). Psychological support is necessary if it's expected of them to successfully cope with all of those challenges. Otherwise, stress can lead to burnout (UN, 2020).

The role of teachers in the ERT environment changed their role in contemporary education. This revealed that teachers providing students with support and becoming mentors, leaders, and helpers was more important than lecturing and transferring knowledge. ERT demonstrated the significance of guiding students towards metacognitive and self-regulated learning and encouraging experiential and collaborative learning by providing content and assignments that are connected to real life. The teachers' roles were also to enable interaction and communication in the virtual environment, assist in the development of relations, and to encourage active engagement and involvement of each student. Emphasis was put on the facilitation of learning in the sense of increased adaptability, democracy, discussions with students concerning aims, learning outcomes, learning methods, and the regulation of the learning process.

Challenges which teachers encountered had an inevitable impact on the students' learning. Technical, organizational, methodical, and other difficulties they faced during the transition to ERT unfortunately negatively impacted educational outcomes and the quality of the learning process (Rasmitadila et al., 2020).

2.2 Educational Challenges for Students

As a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic, the transition to ERT presented itself as a challenge for both teachers and students. It is believed that this adjustment in teaching and learning will very likely result in student learning loss (Di Pietro et al., 2020) due to a number of reasons. Some challenges students are confronted with are derived from their socioeconomic status. In other words, the knowledge and competences they acquire greatly depend on the availability and usage of the Internet and technology, their digital literacy skills, and the support they get at home from their parents and other household members during the learning process. The remaining challenges they face relate to: time management, control over the learning process, dealing with stress, and potential mental health impairment due to significant changes in everyday life. Adjustments are especially needed in communication during the teaching-learning process, which requires extensive flexibility and the ability to adapt to the new learning environment. (ibid)

One of the priorities in educational politics is assuring equity in education – in the sense of its availability, utilization of educational opportunities, and the realization of desired educational outcomes. Despite of that, inequity in education is still present (Hippe, Araujo & da Costa, 2016) and is even more magnified in these types of crisis situations (Rohs & Ganz, 2015) when the implementation of ERT is required. Di Pietro et al. (2020) state that vulnerable groups of students, e.g. those from under-developed areas who live in poverty, will likely fall behind their peers in terms of academic progress. It is problematic to expect from students to keep track of their studies and take on their responsibilities if they don't have access to necessary technology (computer, laptop, tablet, or smartphone) and/or broadband internet service. Furthermore, it is less likely that their home environment will allow them to concentrate and study in peace. It is especially difficult for children in single-parent families and for those in bigger households, as well as for special needs students who require additional educational adjustments. (ibid) Even though access to technology and the Internet is the key requirement for the implementation of remote teaching, it is wrong to assume that it is enough for online learning to be successful. Students need digital and internet literacy, having critical thinking in mind, but also self-directed learning skills. (Taskeen, 2020) Rohs and Ganz (2015) point out that an individual's ability to utilize their resources and opportunities, when it comes to online learning, is proportionate to their socioeconomic status. This notion is founded on the Knowledge Gap Theory (Tichenor, Donohue & Olien, 1970). According to it, individuals with higher socioeconomic status have better communication skills, a broader range of prior knowledge that makes it easier to understand and acquire new knowledge, a greater number of social contacts and more frequent social interactions, better information literacy skills, and are more familiar with political and science related topics than individuals with lower socioeconomic status. (Wirth, cited in Rohs & Ganz, 2015) This ensures them greater flexibility and an ability to adapt easily when they are encountered with challenges.

For students to be successful in adapting to remote learning, it is of great importance that they have their parents' support. This is crucial for younger children who need assistance in the adaptation process, which means that their parents should maintain continuous communication with teachers. However, this could be proven difficult if the parents are of lower socioeconomic status. It is probable that they are already under a significant amount of stress due to their financial situation and, potentially, the loss of their job as a result of the COVID-19 crisis. Consequently, they are likely not able to give their children the support they need during the learning process. (Di Pietro et al., 2020) Parents who are able to give support take on an additional obligation (Hyseni Duraku & Hoxa, 2020) which leads to increased levels of stress. This (stressful) learning environment, in which students are sometimes left on their own, can have a negative effect on their ability to adapt to a new and unfamiliar situation.

Other than difficulties that originate from socioeconomic status, students encounter various other challenges that can threaten their progress in knowledge acquirement and skill development. For instance, if students haven't developed time management skills, making it difficult for them to organize and complete their tasks on time, it can have a negative impact on their motivation to learn. Di Pietro et al. (2020) emphasize that the transition to remote teaching can lead to students spending far less time learning than they would in the classroom. Some students have difficulties with organizing their time and activity, which makes them feel they have more freedom because no one is supervising them (Yates et al., 2020). This lack of skills and the loss of their daily school routine diminishes students' motivation to learn and carry out their responsibilities, leading to a lesser amount of time spent on learning. Additionally, students often think that the transition to remote teaching has increased the amount of their school responsibilities, which additionally weakens their motivation. Other reasons that have a negative impact on motivation are of contextual nature. For example, looking after siblings or helping around the household, distractions like Netflix, online shopping, etc. For some "the hardest part of working from home was finding the motivation to do schoolwork during the uncertainty of the state of the world". (ibid, p. 9) The lack of school structure and learning solely at home cause a confusion that can be explained through behavioral patterns of students during weekends and school breaks, i.e. periods when they don't go to school. Wang et al. (2020) state that, when students are less physically active, they tend to spend more time looking at screens, have an inconsistent sleep-wake rhythm, eat nutritionally imbalanced food which then leads to weight-gain and poor cardiorespiratory fitness. It is possible that the consequences of remote teaching will impact children's health even more because "children are confined to their homes without outdoor activities and interaction with same aged friends during the outbreak". (ibid, p. 946).

It is a real possibility that students won't only feel a negative impact on their physical health but on their mental health as well. Transitioning to ERT, fast adaptation and flexibility were expected from students. All of a sudden, they were forced to self-regulate and manage their time and learning process. It was expected of them to have highly developed digital literacy skills, but also to be actively engaged during online classes, all

while everything around them was changing. Big changes such as this one put students under a large amount of psychological stress. (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020; Bozkurt et al., 2020) Moreover, Asanov et al. (2020) highlight that the COVID-19 pandemic will probably directly contribute to the development of anxiety in students making them worry about their and their family's health. Also, it will indirectly have an impact on their mental wellbeing. Some parents noticed behavioral changes in their children during lockdown, such as: fear, signs of panic, despair, stress, anxiety, confusion, and passiveness (Hyseni Duraku & Hoxha, 2020). The level of stress students are under is also caused by the uncertainty connected to their return to school and physical classrooms, i.e. by the lack of communication between the Ministry of Education and the general public (Bozkurt et al., 2020), but also the change in the means of communication as a result of lockdown and isolation.

One of the most significant changes with which students were faced was the change in the means of communication with their teachers and peers – communication was brought into the virtual world. Yates et al. (2020) state that students prefer "face-to-face" communication in the classroom due to the physical closeness of their teacher and peers, as well as the direct support and feedback they receive from them. On the other side, communication through applications such as Zoom, which were not used before, seemed unnatural to students because only one person could talk at a time, most frequently the teacher. During online classes, students often disable their cameras and microphones which additionally hinders any type of communication. In other words, students oftentimes feel uncomfortable asking the teacher questions via Zoom (in front of the whole class), e-mail, or the phone. The situation is worsened if they have to wait for a long time to receive feedback from the teacher, which further demotivates them. (ibid)

Not only is teacher-student communication problematic but also communication among peers can be difficult to achieve. It requires additional flexibility and navigation through the virtual world. While in-classroom communication can include casual conversations about school responsibilities between students, during online classes that can be challenging (Yates et al., 2020). Di Pietro et al. (2020) emphasize the important role peers have in an individual's overall development. A competitive atmosphere is often present among students which has a positive impact on their motivation to learn and contributes to their academic success. Furthermore, peer teaching is another positive side of classroom teaching. It results in cooperation and advancement of knowledge and competence. Similarly, while they are cooperating and participating in group activities in the classroom, students are improving their social skills which will benefit them in both their personal and professional development. If ERT is narrowed down to listening to the teacher's lecture about a certain topic without using online tools and applications which enable and encourage collaborative learning, the social and emotional development of students will suffer a loss.

It must not be overlooked that emotions and the emotional state of students are a part of the learning process, whether it takes place in the classroom or online. Subsequently, Bozkurt and Sharma (2020, p.3) inquire the following:

> In a time of crisis, when people are under trauma, stress and psychological pressure, should we focus on teaching educational content or should we focus on teaching how to share, collaborate and support? We should remember, when things go back to normal, people will not remember the educational content delivered, but they will remember how they felt, how we cared for them, and how we supported them.

3 CARING PEDAGOGY AT THE CENTRE OF EMERGENCY REMOTE TEACHING

The significance of a caring student-teacher relationship for the student's overall development has already been thoroughly studied, starting with preschool and continuing to the high school educational stage (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Roorda, Koomen, Split & Oort, 2011). It was proven that a positive relationship contributes to, among other things, the student's emotion regulation, readiness to deal with challenges and to freely explore the world, i.e. their overall socioemotional development as well as their academic success (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Bergin, C. & Bergin, D., 2009). During the coronavirus crisis and social distancing, the development of such a relationship with students and humanizing virtual learning have become an imperative for teachers. In other words, their nurturing role became as, if not more, important as their educational role. Bozkurt and Sharma (2000) emphasize that it is equally important to be attentive and give support to students as it is to carry out the teaching-learning process. They point out that, during these trying times, emphasis shouldn't be on the amount of knowledge students acquire. Instead, the focus should be on nurturing a relationship in which the teacher shows empathy and understanding of the students' needs and emotional states. The teacher's support is characterized by acceptance of and respect for each student, calm and patient problem solving, mutual respect, optimistic messages and encouraging feedback, and guidance towards responsible behavior (Jurčić, 2012). These ideas are founded on relational pedagogy

(Sidorkin, 2000), i.e. pedagogy of care.

The notion that the relationship is more real than the factors it gathers is in the core of relational pedagogy. In other words, humans and non-human objects become real only when they are in relation with other humans and objects. And individual's words and behavior don't have meaning when they are out of context, i.e. they can't be understood nor interpreted. In the educational context, this would mean that learning is the equivalent of understanding oneself, relationships with others inside of the community or the world in general, which is why understanding should be the foundation of teaching (Sidorkin, 2000). Relational pedagogy emphasizes the significance of the teacher's thoughtfulness, i.e. developing trust, nurturing relationships, being attentive, and acknowledging students' needs (Noddings, 2005). Only in that kind of safe relationship and supportive learning environment can crucial conditions for significant learning be made (Rogers, 1969). This leads to the students' behavioral changes making their whole being different. Bozkurt et al. (2020, p. 4) explain the following:

> A care approach to education pushes educators to recognize and address the diversity of students' experiences and vulnerabilities, allowing them to be more receptive not only to the assumed needs of students but also their expressed and individual needs. This requires structures and practices that go beyond academia and prioritizes the emotional and psychological development and needs of students, especially during times of crisis.

Furthermore, the authors explain that an open and authentic dialogue with students is important, especially with those who belong to vulnerable groups and who have difficulties with the challenges of online learning. Only then will teachers be able to give them adequate support with confronting those challenges. (ibid) Therefore, each teacher should consider whether they give enough attention to their students and their attitude towards the learning process, or do they focus on carrying out the teaching-learning process, i.e. transferring knowledge without emotional involvement. It is more important to build a support system for students – to enable students to become stronger, braver, and to help them develop skills for dealing with challenges. (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020) To achieve that in the virtual environment, it is necessary for teachers to be prepared and to have a positive attitude. This will lead to a safe and encouraging environment in which students will feel comfortable and teachers will be able to compensate for not being physically present (Di Pietro et al., 2020). Claessens et al. (2017) confirm that this type of positive student-teacher relationship contributes to the student's motivation to learn and, eventually, their learning process as a whole. Good quality education is not possible outside of the pedagogical environment and a positive and supportive student-teacher relationship (UN, 2020). Therefore, caring pedagogy should always be considered as a prerequisite for academic success, especially in crisis situations. This means that teachers should be prepared and made competent for such caring efforts during their initial teacher education, as well as after it in the sense of their professional development. In other words, caring pedagogy and positive relationships deserve to be represented in the curriculum for future teacher education as well as in the process of professional development. (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020)

4 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

To finish this paper, it is necessary to question what has been learned during the coronavirus crisis, having all of the challenges teachers and students encountered in mind. Starting with the initial difficulties in the virtual environment, dealing with numerous obligations, and coping with stress and anxiety, it is clear the situation was very demanding for both teachers and students. The COVID-19 pandemic reminded us that the educational system needs to be redirected from an overwhelming curriculum and evaluation focused on content to mindfulness and wellbeing of students. Teachers are confronted with changes in social values, family environments, educational and professional structures, national and global crises, and new opportunities provided by technology (Niemi, 2002). Therefore, it is justified to deliberate on how to continue educating students when they come back into classrooms. This implies the need for continuous lifelong learning and professional development of teachers who are committed to advancing and showing openness towards change and innovation.

In order not to overwhelm teachers and students with challenges and difficulties the pandemic caused in education, educational experts gave suggestions and presented strategies with which teaching and learning can be improved during the pandemic. On the basis of available research and literature, the authors of this paper give conclusions that may serve as guidelines for improving the teaching-learning process in the future. The biggest challenges, with which teachers were faced and had difficulties coping, need special attention. It is important to emphasize that dealing with them adequately helps students do the same with their own issues. Those challenges include *digital competences of teachers* and maintaining the *flexibility of the teaching-learning process*, which aids students in coping with big changes in their learning process.

Another challenge was cultivating *a supportive learning environment*, based on pedagogy of care, which focuses on the wellbeing and mental health of students. Having all of the challenges in mind, teachers should consider the students' socioeconomic status, i.e. gain an insight in the *availability of technology and adequacy of the learning environment* at home.

The crisis revealed the need for professional development of teachers concerning their *digital competences*. Although most teachers are familiar with basic usage of technology, the difficulties appeared in the didactic and methodical aspect of it – when they had to create teaching materials, strategies, and methods that encourage learning in the virtual environment. The same was the case with the evaluation process which needed further clarification. That means that teachers have to acquire additional knowledge and skills, directed towards the students, in order to integrate technology into the educational process and improve online learning (Duraku et al., 2020). Professional development of teachers for usage of ICT in teaching shouldn't be based only on mastering certain digital competences. Instead, it is necessary to direct it towards ways through which technology can enrich teaching without just focusing on the tools themselves (TALIS, 2019). This way, teachers will be able to ensure flexibility of the teaching-learning process, which can contribute to higher student engagement.

The coronavirus pandemic emphasized the importance of flexibility of the teaching-learning process, which encourages the students' autonomy, self-reliance, and self-regulated learning. Although, ERT and implemented educational programs revealed the lack of an adequate and flexible curriculum that is founded on students' individual needs (UNESCO, 2020). This caused challenges in maintaining both students' and teachers' motivation. It is wrong to expect students to be interested and enthusiastic about the learning process if the teachers aren't motivated themselves. To preserve student motivation, the crisis highlighted the significance of active learning which should be aimed towards authentic assignments connected to real life, projects and research assignments, as well as collaborative learning. In this regard, it is necessary to focus on "deep learning" and acquiring knowledge linked to real life situations instead of "shallow learning" and testing acquired content. Also, it is important to encourage collaborative learning. The combination of synchronous and asynchronous communication enables dealing with challenges successfully, which provides students with more opportunities for organizing themselves and managing their own time, as well as taking initiative for their education. Openness of the educational system is of great significance for finding adequate solutions to educational issues. In this context, the role of the teacher lies in the facilitation of learning, ensuring democracy, and discussing aims, methods, and control over the learning process with students. Maggio et al. (2018) mention a way of coping with the uncomfortable transition to ERT which is teachers "treating themselves" by preserving teaching components that give them joy and provide them with the feeling of satisfaction and self-efficiency. This will surely give them enough mental stamina to create a supportive and encouraging learning environment for their students.

As the success of the learning process depends on the emotional state of the student, never before has the nurturing role of the teacher been so evident. This role manifests itself in the *cultivation of a positive and supportive atmosphere and environment* (UNESCO, 2020). One of the most difficult challenges teachers faced was connected to the students' overall development. Focusing on mental health and strength of students, which is a part of caring pedagogy, became a priority. Teachers had an important role in helping students develop protective factors in the sense of caring, supporting, and encouraging. In a safe environment, teachers had a task of identifying students who could potentially suffer from anxiety and depression, which is why teachers' competences related to psychology came into focus. It was made obvious that they should have knowledge concerning basic psychological techniques to be able to help students relieve their anxiety. Some of those techniques are counseling techniques, relaxation methods, art therapy, and mindfulness training. Teachers have to be aware that younger students haven't yet developed self-regulating learning skills and that they need continuous socioemotional support. Special attention, support, and help should have been directed towards at-risk student groups, e.g. students with special needs. This requires constantly being in contact with parents and medical professionals (Haleemunisa et al., 2021). The parents' role was proven important as well, especially those of younger students who need their parents to "learn to listen and understand the child, give them an opportunity to show emotions in a way that is best suited for their age group" (Klasnić, Đuranović, 2020, p. 170). Students weren't the only ones who confronted emotional issues. Teachers also encountered personal challenges and needed help and support. The school in which they work should provide them with the necessary support, in the sense of helping them cope with anxiety, as well as making sure they have adequate teaching conditions and sufficient compensation for their work.

Considering the mentioned, it is important to acknowledge the fact that teachers, as essential parts of the educational process, shouldn't be left to their own devices in dealing with changes and challenges. For them

to successfully live out this role, they should have access to support from the headmaster and the school they work in, parents, community, and society in general. Support should be visible in the work of the creators of educational policies. They should make sure even the most vulnerable students get the opportunity to compensate the learning losses they experienced during lockdown in order to make sure educational inequity doesn't deepen. The infrastructure of online learning should be strengthened. Special attention should be given to availability of technology for students with lower socioeconomic status, as well as adapting the technology to students with special needs (Di Pietro et al., 2020).

Even though it seems that the challenges and issues caused by the pandemic were inevitable, we should try looking at the situation from a positive standpoint. Although this pandemic brought about deeply disruptive implications, the final outcomes weren't defined in advance. In this paper, we emphasized the challenges and issues teachers and students encountered in order to prevent similar difficulties in the future. The aim is to advance ERT and its efficiency, improve lives and opportunities of students and teachers, and develop better collaboration between schools. Despite numerous issues, the pandemic proved that change is possible. It made it evident that there is a need for reorganizing and rethinking education – focusing on three key questions: What should be taught? How should it be done? Where should it be done? (Zhao, 2020) Opportunities for international collaboration were manifested. Resilience, flexibility, and adaptability were exposed as the keys for coping with a crisis. We should be rational and aware of the improvements that have to be made. The implementation of ERT leads to a transformation in the pedagogical approach. We strengthened existing and developed new competences and creative and innovative approaches towards students and their parents. The experiences we went through during the pandemic should be taken into account in future planning (Opić, 2020, UNESCO, 2020). Even though it is difficult to predict all of the future consequences of the coronavirus crisis, we have to believe in a better tomorrow. As teachers, we have to have in mind that the most valuable action is helping and caring for one another, especially for the less fortunate.

By critically thinking about the educational challenges with which teachers and students were encountered during the COVID-19 crisis, this paper contributes to a wider understanding of said difficulties. It provides support for further research and development of alternative and creative solutions that can lead to significant improvement of the educational system in crisis situations such as this one.

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