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## Positives and Negatives of Distance Education from the Perspective of Teachers with Practical Experience

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### Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic had overnight affected all areas of traditional life. In the field of education, the classic face-to-face teaching was replaced by distance education at all levels of the educational system not only in Slovakia but in all countries of the world. Teachers, pupils, parents, teaching assistants, special educators or professional staff had had no experience with distance education up to that point. In today's vulnerable world, the possibility of a combined educational process, in which teaching would be divided between face-to-face and distance education, is being raised more frequently mainly in connection with the energy crisis. Setting the right balance between face-to-face and distance education requires, among other things, defining the positives and negatives of these forms. Given the existing extensive theoretical elaboration of the issue of face-to-face teaching, our study focuses on the positives and negatives of distance education, while using the period of the COVID-19 pandemic. Through interviews, we collected the views of primary school teachers experienced in distance education.

We focused on questions dealing with advantages, disadvantages, forms, methods and overall attitudes towards distance education. The study concludes by categorising the advantages and disadvantages of distance education. Based on the analysis of the responses obtained through semi-structured interviews with six teachers, we found that distance education has more negative than positive aspects. The main negatives include the lack of physical contact and the absence of social interaction. Furthermore, we found that there is low motivation, skipping lessons and lack of attention among upper grade students. Parental support for pupils in the upper grades was rather low. Teachers mainly used Slovak online platforms for distance learning. This study was done in Slovakia.

**Keywords:** distance education, student teacher, survey.

### **Theoretical introduction to the issue**

During the COVID-19 pandemic, most teachers combined online and offline forms of distance education, which they rated as less effective compared to traditional teaching. Asynchronous teaching and emailing assignments predominated in online teaching. For offline teaching, it was a combination of sending worksheets and telephone contact. The biggest problem during distance education was the lack of digital skills for both students and their teachers (Ostertágová & Čokyna, 2020, pp. 1–3). Several researchers in Slovakia and abroad have addressed the issue of distance education during the COVID-19 pandemic. Students of University of Michigan reported the lack of social interaction as a negative experience of distance education. Students also reported positive experiences, such as flexibility of time and location (Al-Mawee et al., 2021, pp. 1–2). According to Masalimova et al. (2022, pp. 1–2), satisfaction rates with distance education vary considerably. They also list the main advantages of this form of education as the possibility to learn anytime and anywhere. They emphasize that students' satisfaction depends on various factors such as country, learning content and others. Kožuchová (2022, pp. 44–45) focused her research on teachers during the implementation of distance education. Through semi-structured interviews, she surveyed 8 teachers to find out to what extent the coronacrisis affected the students' learning area and what means the teachers chose to continue the teaching. Among the main findings, she reports that pupils and teachers were constrained by technical problems. The technical skills of some teachers were

also an issue. She cites the positives of distance education in her research as being that pupils improved their digital competencies.

The origins of distance education can be traced back more than a century. The first distance-learning students were mostly students from rural or very remote areas, living far from educational institutions, and members of the military who could, thanks to distance learning, complete the education they had missed because of their service in the army. The main technologies used in distance education at that time included radio, print, television and, later, audiocassettes, videocassettes, fax machines and the like. The British Open University made a significant step in the provision of distance learning. It sent study materials to students by post and supplemented them with broadcasting and television (Sadeghi, 2019, p. 81). Nowadays, we view distance education as any learning activities within formal, informal and non-formal domains that are facilitated by information and communication technologies in order to reduce distance, both physically and psychologically, while increasing interactivity and communication between learners, learning resources and facilitators (Bozkurt, 2019, p. 256). Distance education is also available to learners and students who do not have access to the Internet, for example, through DVDs, television, etc. The learner has the opportunity to learn and take exams, for example, through the screen of his or her phone, computer, and so on (Wilson, 2022). Vlasenko and Bozhok (2014) see the Internet as the most important tool for facilitating distance education.

Act No. 245/2008 Coll. on Education and Training, also called the School Act, defines distance education as “remote education through correspondence, telecommunication media and other means in which there is usually no direct contact between the teaching staff and the independent learner” (National Council of the Slovak Republic, 2008). Based on the above, distance education can be seen as a process where the teacher and the pupil are not physically present in the classroom, but the teaching process takes place through digital tools, software, electronic media and information and communication technologies. In addition to the spatial barrier, there may also be a time barrier between the teacher and the pupil.

Wilson (2022) defines several advantages of distance education compared to traditional teaching. Advantages of e-learning:

1. No limitation of place and time – The most important feature of distance education is the fact that there are no limitations of time and place. It is a practical way of educating students and learners who live far away from the educational institution. Institutions consider distance education a more convenient way of teaching. This is because it does not require much infrastructure and also teachers can teach from the comfort of their homes.
2. The possibility of recording the class – today’s modern technology and software offer students the opportunity to record lectures and then view them at any time. This way, the student does not have to worry about losing focus and missing important information.
3. Ideal form for people with anxiety – social anxiety and other behavioural disorders are quite prevalent among today’s youth. These prevent them from interacting openly in classrooms during traditional face-to-face instruction. Students using electronic platforms can either interact directly with the teacher and classmates or post their questions via chat or messaging. As a result, students’ written communication skills improve.
4. Comfortable learning – classroom teaching can be rushed and tiring. Students are expected to respond quickly to questions without sufficient time to think about the answer. Discussion sessions are different from lectures on online learning platforms. In addition, students have ample time to prepare for these discussions. They can also plan their answers to the questions in advance. Slow learners can study at their own pace because not all learners have the same ability to absorb knowledge.
5. Saving money and resources – on-campus courses are considerably more expensive as opposed to e-distance learning, which is more affordable even for students from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Online education is not only cheaper in terms of tuition fees but also eliminates the cost of living close to campus or on campus.
6. Improved communication techniques – Distance education is an opportunity for students with disabilities or those who are not comfortable in the company of people. Through distance education, everyone has the opportunity to communicate and connect with others through

- group projects, assignments and interviews. In addition, children from different backgrounds learn how to do coordinated work that might otherwise make them feel socially excluded. “Discussion forums have proved to be quite effective. In fact, they motivate students to interact by providing a safe space to present their views” (Wilson, 2022, online).
7. Eliminating commuting – Students who live far from their school have to commute every day, which takes up most of their time, energy and money. Online education not only saves time and money by eliminating the need to travel on crowded buses and trains, but the student also has the energy to do other important tasks during the day. “In addition, commuting is not feasible for everyone, especially those with health issues or those who live in remote areas” Wilson, 2022, online).
  8. Diversity in education – students are able to schedule their time and take several online courses in different areas, for example, a student may study English in one educational institution and French in another. These courses can also be taken from the comfort of their own home.
  9. Teacher availability – The internet has changed a lot in the field of education and one of the most innovative changes has been to compensate for staff shortages and to expand the hours available. Through online platforms, teachers can respond to questions and suggestions from students whenever they have time.
  10. Earnings and education – education has become prohibitively expensive, and although online education is cheaper, it is still not free. According to Wilson (2022) “most students who opt for e-learning are those who want to get a higher education but have the responsibility of a job. These students also cannot leave their jobs to attend classroom lectures, and e-learning is the only way that suits their situation.” Vlasenko and Bozhok (2014) consider the flexibility of distance education to be the biggest advantage. According to the American Research Institute (Li & Lalani, 2020), e-learning increases the knowledge retention rate, ranging from 25% to 60%, compared to face-to-face instruction, which ranges from 8% to 10%. This is because learners using e-learning have more control over the learning process and the ability to repeatedly return to instruction and materials as needed.

The above shows that distance education has a number of advantages. For this reason, it is becoming popular with students and teachers. Distance education provides learners with greater comfort and convenience, time flexibility and saves money and the environment. It accommodates learners who cannot physically participate in the learning process, for example for health reasons. Distance learning is also an ideal form of learning for working learners in higher education.

Like the traditional form of face-to-face teaching, distance education has its drawbacks. Sadeghi (2019, pp. 83–84) defines several negative aspects of distance education:

1. High likelihood of distraction – without personal interaction with the teacher and regular reminders of assignments to be completed, students are more likely to forget deadlines and given assignments. Students need to stay motivated and focused.
2. Technology – Distance education is dependent on technology. The student must have access to a computer, a camera, and an internet connection that is reliable. With this in mind, students must have a sufficient level of digital literacy. Technology or software failure can disrupt the distance learning process.
3. Lack of social interaction – students may feel lonely, which can lead to various problems such as high levels of anger and stress. Traditional face-to-face teaching allows students to socialise, interact face-to-face, make new connections, and so on. Distance education limits interaction to resources in a virtual environment. “The difficulties and stress experienced by students in distance education may not be well understood. Working alone at night has caused many complications and depressing experiences” (Sadeghi, 2019, p. 84).
4. Difficulties in maintaining contact with the teacher – in face-to-face teaching it is relatively easy to talk to the teacher in case of complications, such as misunderstanding the assignment. In distance education, this can be a problem. The response to an email is not immediate, unlike physical contact.
5. Labour markets do not accept online degrees – not all employers in the labour market recognise a degree obtained through distance education. They do not accept such a degree even in government posi-

tions. “Employers still prefer traditional college degrees over online or distance learning. They believe that distance education is still not a significant educational option” (Sadeghi, 2019, p. 84).

Distance education can also become a disadvantage for teachers themselves. In traditional face-to-face teaching, the teacher receives feedback immediately, but in distance education, it takes longer to determine whether the student has mastered the knowledge because, in addition to the knowledge, the teacher has to ascertain whether the set objectives for competence development have been met (Oliveira et al., 2018, pp. 149–150). Distance education is mostly performed online. As a result, students spend a significant amount of time in front of computer screens, mobile phones or tablets, which can lead to physical problems such as visual impairments, obesity and so on. Young people today spend too much of their free time with their smartphones or other digital technologies. For this very reason, online education can deepen their dependence on digital technologies. During a synchronous learning lesson, the learner may be distracted by notifications and messages on social media and pay minimal attention to the learning process itself.

In the next section of our study, we present the teachers’ perception of the distance education process they implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic, including its advantages and disadvantages.

## **Survey of teachers’ opinions**

The main goal of the survey was to find out how primary school teachers view distance education. Through the respondents’ statements, we sought answers to the following basic questions:

1. What methods and forms of distance education do teachers prefer?
2. What are the perceived positives of distance education for teachers?
3. What negatives do teachers observe in distance education?
4. What attitudes do teachers have towards distance education?
5. How did teachers perceive support from the school, colleagues and parents in distance education?

Given our research goal and questions, we used semi-structured interviews. This type of interview enables researchers to prepare the structure with framework questions in advance while the questions may be later sup-

plemented as needed and as the situation requires. The advantages of this type of interview include direct social interaction, the possibility to react to the respondent's behaviour, the possibility to understand the respondent's views and to penetrate more deeply into the respondent's attitudes. The main disadvantages include time and organisational demands. It is important to create a level playing field for all respondents who have to agree to the audio recording. Consequently, it is important to consider who will be interviewed, it is necessary to formulate the questions correctly and it is also advisable to create a positive atmosphere. As part of our survey, we asked respondents the following questions:

1. What digital tools and technologies do you use during distance education?
2. Did you use online platforms such as planetavedomosti.sk and the like during distance education?
3. What do you consider to be the advantages of distance education?
4. What do you consider to be the disadvantages of distance education?
5. How did you adapt to and perceived the distance learning process?
6. What was your experience of teaching students from home?
7. How helpful was your school in supporting distance education?
8. How helpful were parents in supporting their children's distance learning?
9. How helpful were your colleagues?

The survey sample was drawn through a combination of purposive and convenience sampling. In our study, a total of 8 primary school teachers were asked to participate. However, 2 of the potential respondents declined to participate, resulting in a final sample size of 6 participants. The interviews were conducted face-to-face, with an average duration of approximately 30 minutes per interview. The majority of interviews (5 out of 6) took place in person, either in the office of the researcher, at the respondent's home, or in a coffee shop. One interview was conducted remotely using the Google Meet platform. The selected participants in our study consisted of young teachers under the age of 35. Their teaching specializations included especially Slovak language, ethics education, English language, geography, and history. In terms of the respondents' place of residence, the sample included teacher from Žilina, Banská Bystrica, Trnava, Trenčín and Bratislava regions. The



survey sample consisted of 6 respondents, 3 females and 3 males. Each respondent was asked ten prepared questions, which were supplemented during the interview if the situation required it. Due to the stipulated scope of the study, we will only present the findings for three survey questions:

In the second survey question, we were interested in what teachers perceived as positive aspects of distance education. Teachers were asked what they considered to be the advantages of distance education. Among the responses, the dominant benefit of distance education was its influence on improving digital competences among students and teachers. For example, teacher Martina told us that, over time, pupils who had previously been quieter and more bashful began to express themselves and engage in discussions. She further stated that due to distance education, her fellow teachers were forced to make more use of presentations and online platforms, for example, to create didactic games, quizzes, etc. Teacher Lubomír considers distance education a very good experience because he had not previously worked with online platforms for creating educational content and online meetings. Currently, he uses these platforms as a form of self-education. Another advantage of distance education, according to the majority of respondents, is a more efficient use of time. Teacher Peter stated that students had to search for information and appropriate resources on their own in the online environment. Therefore, pupils had to distinguish between true and false information or reliable and unreliable sources. Teacher Jana stated that the advantage of this form of education was that she did not have to travel to work every morning and she improved her ICT skills and knowledge.

Based on the teachers' responses, we can see that there are several advantages of distance learning. Students have become more active in discussions and expressed their opinions, which just may be related to the comfort and safety of the environment. Pupils also had to search for information in the online environment and work with different resources. This increased the level of critical thinking as they had to distinguish between relevant and reliable information.

Table 1. Benefits of distance education according to surveyed respondents

Advantages of distance education	Teacher Peter	Teacher Marek	Teacher Ľubomír	Teacher Jana	Teacher Martina	Teacher Katarína
Development of pupils' information literacy	X					
Enhancing pupils' digital competences	X	X	X	X		
Enhancing teachers' digital competences		X	X	X		
More efficient use of time		X	X		X	X
Muting a pupil during classes				X		
Improvement of pupils' communication techniques					X	

Source: Authors' research.

The table shows that the key advantages of distance education, according to the respondents' answers, are the enhancement of pupils' digital competences and more efficient use of time. These benefits were mentioned by four teachers. As stated above, online synchronous learning was the predominant method among our respondents. For this reason, teachers had to use online educational material, platforms, applications or portals that made the educational process more efficient. Another advantage is the enhancement of digital competences and skills among teachers, as stated by three respondents. Benefits such as muting the pupils' microphones during the lesson, improving communication techniques and developing pupils' information literacy were mentioned only once.

In the third question of the survey, we wanted to know what were the perceived negatives of distance learning for teachers. The respondents were further asked what they saw as the disadvantages of distance education. Five of the six teachers agreed that the disadvantage of distance education is the absence of interaction and physical contact with students. Teacher Peter told us in the interview that he could not control the pupils during the lesson. He also stated that not all pupils were able to join the lesson. Some did not have

a microphone, camera or both. This problem was mentioned not only by the above-named teacher but also by teacher Martina. In her experience, not all pupils had good internet connections or their cameras turned on. She also experienced problems with the MS Teams platform, for example, she was often disconnected or could not start a presentation. She also told us that pupils did not have access to the books they wanted to read in her literature classes. The libraries were closed in light of the measures taken to combat the spread of COVID-19. For this reason, pupils read books they had at home or searched for various texts on the Internet. Teacher Marek stated that, in addition to the lack of personal contact, testing pupils' knowledge and explaining new material were also problematic. According to him, the interest in learning among pupils of the higher grades was rather low or non-existent. Teacher Lubomír told us in the interview that compared to traditional face-to-face teaching, pupils did not take notes during distance education and did not pay enough attention to the lesson. Another disadvantage he perceived was the lack of equipment in the schools. The teacher Katarína told us that she couldn't control the pupils during distance education and therefore some pupils cheated in exams and written work. Teacher Jana told us that she spent much more time preparing for classes, especially in the beginning when the timetable modified for distance education had not yet been prepared and they taught according to the original timetable. Most of her time was taken up with finding appropriate educational materials, videos and exercises and by transcribing materials. She also mentioned that she had problems with the MS Teams platform and that some students had problems with the quality of their internet connection.

Table 2. Disadvantages of distance education according to surveyed respondents

Disadvantages of distance learning	Teacher Peter	Teacher Marek	Teacher Lubomír	Teacher Jana	Teacher Martina	Teacher Katarína
Absence of physical contact	X	X		X	X	X
Insufficient control by the teacher	X	X				X
Pupils' technical problems	X			X	X	

Table 2. (continued)

Disadvantages of distance learning	Teacher Peter	Teacher Marek	Teacher Ľubomír	Teacher Jana	Teacher Martina	Teacher Katarína
Teachers' technical problems				X	X	
More difficult to explain the topic		X				
Lack of interaction	X	X		X	X	X
Longer preparation for lessons				X		
Access to books					X	
Cheating during exams and when writing papers						X
Lack of attention			X			
Lack of feedback			X			

Source: Authors' research.

The above responses indicate that teachers agree on many of the negative aspects of distance education. Their agreement lies in including the absence of physical contact and interaction between teachers and pupils among the disadvantages of distance education. This negativity can have a significant impact on the quality of education. These two negatives were mentioned by all respondents except for teacher Ľubomír who accented other disadvantages of distance education, such as lack of pupils' attention during classes or poor or no feedback from pupils. Teacher Peter, teacher Marek and teacher Katarína pointed out poor teacher control. This can lead to problems with organising and assessing pupils. Another disadvantage relates to pupils' technical problems, which was mentioned by three respondents, and technical problems on the part of the teachers, which was mentioned by two respondents. Difficulty in explaining new material, longer preparation for lessons, limited access to books due to closed libraries and cheating in exams and written work were mentioned by only one respondent each.

Based on the responses of the respondents as shown in Table 1 (advantages of distance education), the disadvantages of distance education are more prevalent when compared to Table 2 (disadvantages of distance education). In total, respondents in the interview reported six advantages and eleven disadvantages of distance education. This shows that this form of education is unattractive compared to traditional teaching and brings with it more negative than positive aspects. Distance learning brings its own challenges and certain limitations. Overcoming the shortcomings of distance education requires a comprehensive approach and cooperation between schools, teachers, pupils and parents.

The last question analysed in our study is the fourth question of our survey, in which we were interested in the attitude of teachers towards distance education. The answer to this survey question was sought through two questions posed to the respondents. The first is: "How did you adapt and perceive the distance education process?" The goal was to collect information about the process of transforming the timetable and the overall adaptation to distance education. Teacher Peter perceived distance education as stressful, mainly because of pupils' low interest and a large number of hours spent in front of the computer. This was also stressed by teacher Jana, who rated distance education, especially during the first wave of COVID-19, as stressful. She stated that in the beginning everything was constantly changing and adjusting. The following school year, however, there were set rules, such as online consultations with the teacher etc. On the contrary, teacher Lubomír perceived distance education as less stressful compared to face-to-face teaching. He further stated that he got used to this form of education very quickly and did not have any major problems with it. Teacher Jana adapted to the distance learning process gradually. In the beginning, she sent the students teaching texts and materials, later she taught through online platforms. However, she evaluates distance education as more challenging compared to traditional classroom teaching. She said that this was mainly because, in her experience, preparation for the teaching process was more conscientious compared to preparation for face-to-face teaching. Teacher Martina rated distance education as frustrating because she found it restrictive. During the traditional classes, she was used to doing various dramatisations or group work at the beginning of the lesson, while these opportunities were limited during dis-

tance learning. However, she further states that she quickly adapted to distance education, even though it was challenging at first. She became more confident when she replaced Skype with the MS Teams platform, which she found overall easier and more suited to teaching. Teacher Katarina evaluates the adaptation to distance education as problem-free, even though it was done day-to-day with short instructional guidance. From the responses, we find that some teachers perceived distance learning as stressful. The problem was precisely to create and maintain motivation in students. On the contrary, some teachers adapted to it quickly. Teachers who apply group work in traditional teaching may have had problems finding alternative ways in distance learning. This may be due to technological skills, low students' motivation, or the rule setting.

Another question asked in the interview was: "What was your experience of teaching pupils from home?" The goal of our question was to find out what specific situations the teachers encountered during distance education, what was different or surprising for them compared to traditional face-to-face teaching and whether this form of education taught them anything new. Teacher Peter compared activity and communication between grades five to seven and grades eight to nine. In the lower grades, students were communicative and interested in the material. In the higher grades, pupils' passivity increased. In the opinion of the teacher Marek, distance education was conducted at a fairly good level. Teacher Lubomír evaluates distance education positively because he improved his digital competences, which he actively uses even today, during the return to face-to-face teaching. This could be due to a lack of interaction with classmates or the teacher, or a lack of motivation. Teacher Jana was surprised by the passivity of the pupils who were previously active during the traditional form of education. During the home-based education, she often had to do other chores and solve problems, such as cooking, receiving parcels from couriers and so on. Teacher Martina could imagine a form of hybrid teaching in the future. What bothered her the most was that the pupils became slightly lazy and she even noticed that they were more often tired. This may be due to the lack of structure and a clearly defined timetable compared to traditional teaching. Teacher Katarína would not want traditional face-to-face teaching to be again replaced by home-based learning.

In the interview, she stated that what pupils lacked the most was the motivation to learn.

The above shows that distance education is perceived negatively by our respondents even though they had no major problems adapting to it. Only the teacher Lubomír evaluates this form of education positively.

Our research sample consisted only of young teachers who teach in primary school. However, the issue of distance education during COVID-19 also affected secondary and higher education teachers. In the future, the research should focus on expanding the research sample to include teachers from secondary schools and colleges to provide a more comprehensive and representative view of distance education issues during the COVID-19 pandemic. We are aware that the issues we have investigated and the results we have obtained have several limitations. We must mention the smaller, and therefore unrepresentative, research sample on which we tested the issue, that we already discussed briefly above. Also, as our aim in this research was to highlight the issue of distance education during the COVID-19 pandemic through younger teachers, future studies that focus on the practices of educators with more experience can certainly be done. We only studied primary school educators, so in the future, similar research can be extended to secondary or university educators who provided distance education during the coronavirus pandemic. Another limitation of the research was the questions asked in the semi-structured interviews, which explored how helpful the school or their colleagues were during distance education. The chosen research technique, which, although providing the possibility of anonymity, was not sufficient enough to consider the evaluated results as absolutely true. This limitation is also a negative in the use of any questionnaire, as there is a presumption that respondents will give false answers, either because they do not take the questionnaire seriously or because they want to answer in a way that will satisfy the researcher. Although we informed the respondents in advance that we would not include their real names in our research, they were concerned that their answers would identify them. This was evident in the responses, which were more concise, compared to other questions asked.

## Conclusions

The analysis of responses from the interviews with the six teachers shows that distance education involves more negative than positive aspects. The main negative aspects of distance learning are the lack of physical contact and the absence of social interaction. In distance education, teachers mainly used Slovak online platforms that contain educational material. Education was conducted mostly in an online synchronous way. To minimise the negative impact of distance education, educational institutions would need to provide comprehensive distance education counselling to staff, pupils and parents. Given the poor level of parental support for children in upper grades, we recommend that educational institutions and the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport should provide training and workshops for parents on digital tools that their child actively uses or can use during distance education. The majority of surveyed respondents stated that they used only Slovak platforms, which are limited compared to foreign platforms. Therefore, it is necessary to create methodological materials for teachers that will contain specific resources from foreign online platforms that can be used during distance education. The methodological materials should contain concrete procedures and instructions, for example how to create an interactive quiz. According to our respondents, poor motivation, skipping classes and lack of attention are typical for pupils in upper grades. For this reason, teachers should apply more active and interactive learning with motivational elements and methods, such as the use of digital games in teaching, project work, etc.

Currently, there are a number of research studies and surveys that focus on distance education during the COVID-19 pandemic; however, most of the studies work with quantitative methods and their research or survey sample is mainly pupils and students. Therefore, in our study, we presented the teachers' points of view, their perceived advantages and disadvantages as well as attitudes towards distance education.



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