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TEACHING PRACTICES DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN AUSTRIA, ESTONIA, FINLAND AND ROMANIA

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There has been much talk about integrating technology into the teaching and learning process. However, until COVID-19 hit in the spring of 2020, there wasn't really any need or want to do this and change already proven teaching practices. COVID-19 changed this overnight - temporary closures of educational facilities and different restrictions highlighted the limits of previous teaching practices. Regardless of their preparedness or predispositions against digital environments, teachers had to switch rather abruptly to remote teaching. While there was hope that COVID-19 and its effects would pass then now, we now understand it is here to stay and previous teaching practices are not managing with the new situation. Due to this, teachers need to combine their successes, failures and overall experiences with different remote teaching methods to improve on these hastily created methods and practices. In order to find out the teachers' previous experiences, concerns, and help disseminate the best teaching practices, we interviewed a total of 31 teachers from Estonia, Finland, Romania and Austria with students from 3 to 19 years old. 15 teachers were from Romania (13 women and 2 men), 6 from Austria (4 women and 2 men), 5 from Finland (3 men and 2 women) and 5 from Estonia (3 women and 2 men). Among them were science (mathematics, physics, chemistry, computer science), humanities (languages, literature, history, religion, art, music), handicrafts teachers, physical education, kindergarten and primary school teachers.

The interviews revealed that teachers' and schools' readiness to cope in the context of school closures and restrictions during the first wave of the COVID-19 virus was very different. In Austria, the transition to online teaching was very slow and some teachers even did no teaching at all for a few weeks or months. One teacher explained that some teachers simply used the computer to check emails and that was it. Teachers in Austria, similar to teachers in other countries, hoped that the emergency situation would last for a short time and after that teaching would continue as before. Thus, they did not rush to organise online lessons. During the first lockdown, no participation in online classes was mandatory and even the number of online lessons could be chosen individually. In many classes, fewer topics were taught than in normal years and the difficulty was often lower. Also, the number of tests was reduced.

Additionally, in Romania, most participants agreed that the sudden shift to online education was quite chaotic in schools. Most teachers had not used any online learning platforms or digital teaching tools before, so they created chat groups on social media to start communicating with children as well as send photos of school book pages. One teacher explained: 'We had to find our own way to do online teaching. Those colleagues who have not been initiated in any digital teaching tools just took photos of the schoolbook pages and asked the children to do the same with their notebooks. It caused me so much distress to see my colleagues' disappointment'. Only one of the 15 teachers interviewed said that Google Classrooms was set up for each class quite quickly, just one month after the start of the lockdown; other schools only started using learning management systems from autumn 2020. Teachers pointed out that most teachers used Zoom or Google Meet for occasional synchronous lessons. Following a directive from the Ministry of Education, the number of grades per semester has been reduced in all schools.

Similarly, to the other countries, teachers in Finland were forced to prepare for distant teaching and learning abruptly during the first wave of the pandemic. Most of the teachers said that they were not allowed to go to school. Everything needed to be done at home. In the schools where these interviewees work, each student who required one was also provided with a laptop or tablet. Only one teacher mentioned that those teachers who wanted could deliver the online class from her or his empty classroom. According to the interviewees, the teachers tried to make schooling as normal as possible and maintain the school timetable as it was despite being online. Contacting students was done using web platforms, usually Wilma (a Finnish communication platform for parents). One teacher said that in the beginning, learning materials were provided by Pedanet (a learning platform) and students were required to study by themselves. After getting feedback that the cost of learning materials was too high, teachers started to use more online live teaching. The teachers set a "check-in time" and asked students to show their faces on the screen just before each lesson.

In Estonia, teachers' readiness for remote teaching varied from school to school. Some teachers said that the transition to online learning was not difficult at all as they had already used this form of teaching many times before the pandemic. They explained that all students and teachers already had iPads with proper cameras for teaching and learning, and they had been using an e-environment (like Stuudium) for years to share learning materials and interact with students, parents and other teachers. Although all schools in Estonia used e-environments to communicate with different parties and organise their studies, not much attention had been paid to the technical equipment of teachers and children in most schools before. During the pandemic, both teachers and students were provided with the opportunity to borrow the necessary equipment for distance teaching and learning (computer, webcam, speaker) by their schools. According to the teachers, a wide variety of environments were used for online meetings at first but this was very confusing for students. Thus, teachers in each school had to agree on the environments they would use. Google Meet, Zoom, Teams, and FaceTime were mostly preferred by teachers for meetings with students, and Opiq and e-koolikott were used to search for teaching materials and give e-tasks to children. Teachers also pointed out that grading students' work had to be more lenient during the emergency.

In remote teaching, teachers in all participating countries were primarily offered assistance in acquiring technical equipment (computer, webcam, etc.). For example, one teacher from a Romanian urban school explained that the number and quality of technical equipment at their school were increased significantly - the management took every opportunity to purchase new hardware; they applied to the Ministry of Education, the local government and also charities. Thus, each child received a new device (tablet) and each teacher a laptop. However, this was not the case in every school and country. Some schools provided teachers with computers and good network connections via their work phones to ensure a fast 4G internet connection, some schools provided only computers and some schools provided camera stands, microphones and other equipment based on teachers' needs.

In terms of other support measures, teachers from different countries pointed out different factors. In Austria, teachers said that the IT specialist from the school gave introductions to the teachers on how to use different software provided by the schools. In some schools, explanatory videos for software use were put on Eduvidual, a learning platform, or sent via email to the teachers. Additionally, several conferences were held to explain the software used to interested teachers. In general, teachers in Austria didn't feel that they received much help. At the same time, they explained that they helped each other and younger teachers explained the technology to those who were not well-acquainted with it. Teachers shared their practices within the school mostly with those who teach the same subject and with whom they have more contact during a normal school year. In some schools, the director held weekly or monthly video conferences to collect new ideas from teachers.

In Romania, only two teachers out of 15 said that their school organised training sessions on an institutional level during online teaching. The exchange of good practices and tips on using digital tools was instead organised by teachers spontaneously after teaching hours. In some schools, peer teaching online events were organised for teachers. Furthermore, in some schools, head-teachers occasionally attended online lessons and later on gave feedback to teachers (for example, making suggestions regarding apps to be used). For teachers, it was also possible to participate as an observer in lessons organised by their colleagues. One teacher shared her experience of this: 'I am a class teacher too. One colleague of mine had some complaints about my class, so I decided to join one of her online lessons. I was a simple participant; I was observing but not interfering in any way. I have learnt a lot from that experience, observing the behaviour of the children, the dynamics of the lesson. Following the lesson, we discussed it all with my colleague. It was such a great peer-observation experience. In such cases, real mutual help is available, probably more than in a situation when the observer is the principal or other authority.' In addition, teacher training institutions and national and international organisations offered several courses, training sessions, and exchange of experiences where teachers could participate. One teacher mentioned that she has attended over 50 training sessions since the beginning of online teaching in spring 2020.

Interviews with Finnish teachers revealed that most teachers had already been used to using technical tools like Google Classroom, Meet, Zoom, and Teams. Thus, many of them did not required any human resource support regarding these applications during the pandemic. In problematic situations, it was still possible to ask colleagues for help by email or Messenger on Facebook or What'sApp. At the same time, one teacher said that the municipality sent ICT or digital tutors to the school. They were not professional IT specialists but rather, teacher colleagues who received entitlement and working time from the municipality to help the staff in ICT matters. Therefore, tutors could give advice from the viewpoints of not only ICT but also pedagogy. Teachers themselves shared their best practices via emailing lists, in Facebook communities (for example, ICT teachers in Finland, Google Classroom tips etc.), and in the Finnish online educational platform,, PedaNet. In the school of one of the Finnish teachers interviewed, teachers made a chat group in Teams to share information. Another school organised online coffee breaks for staff every day where teachers systematically collected ideas and shared practical information regarding handling the situations in online learning.

In Estonia, similarly to Austria, IT specialists provided help for teachers. They organised institutional level training about using different learning and teaching environments, gave hints on how to organise remote teaching, gathered and organised information and created video clips about different apps and learning environments into shared folders, and helped to solve technical problems when they arose. The teachers themselves sought a lot of information about new teaching methods and environments, experimented with new techniques and immediately shared their experience with others in special meetings or via e-channels. Teachers also pointed out that cooperation between teachers in the same field increased. In some schools, teachers shared their learning materials with others and in some cases, they even planned activities together.

To better support teachers and families in the conditions of COVID-19, many schools in all participating countries asked for verbal feedback from students and teachers, in addition to which written feedback from children and parents was also collected in Finland and Estonia. Based on the results of surveys and the information gathered in meetings, some changes were made. For example, after receiving feedback saying that there are too many assignments in some subjects, teachers were instructed to ensure that during online teaching and learning, the workload of students did not become too burdensome.

After the first lockdown period, schools were gradually reopened but teaching could not continue as before. Because some children were not able to attend school due to restrictions, classroom teaching had to be replaced by hybrid teaching. During online/hybrid

learning, many teachers felt that teaching in its new form was harder for both teachers and students. Students' behaviour was harder to notice and because of this, teachers could not be sure of the extent to which students were focused on lessons. New learning resources took time to find and/or create, but on the other hand, as teachers pointed out, there were now more instruments to choose from while planning lessons.

Of the most suitable teaching and learning activities in blended/hybrid learning, many of the interviewed teachers explained that they used some of the additional tools that are available in various video conference programs, mainly chat and separating into groups functions. Also, for individual tasks, YouTube videos explaining the topic were used. Several teachers in Romania even recorded some lessons in their own voice and their students liked these more than other videos.

In Austria and Estonia, teachers relayed that one could use a tablet projected and with a shared view to broadcast information simultaneously to students in the classroom and those at home. They also use live connections to students at home to virtually keep them in the classroom so they could study with their classmates. In Estonia and Finland, some teachers took on a more practical way of giving out materials for lessons. In one case, a teacher packed and gave students some materials for the oncoming distance learning, in another, the teacher let students do experiments with chemicals usually found in every household or by taking advantage of the many sensors incorporated into modern smartphones.

In order to take care of the well-being of the children, the schools and teachers tried to limit the time children spent looking at screens. Also, the usual workload of students was reduced because not every student could keep up with the usual pace while being online. In Romania, primary school teachers tried to find opportunities to meet with their students in the open air and in small groups. Providing individual support for children was more difficult online than in the classroom for many teachers from different countries. Some teachers stayed in the online video conference room a little longer after lessons to give students the opportunity to ask questions if something was unclear or just discuss something one-to-one. Some teachers organised special events for this but only a few students used this opportunity. Some teachers gave assignments according to the students' skill level and some focused on giving more in-depth feedback to less skilful students' homework. This required more time and increased the workload of the teacher. On the topic of easing the teachers' workload, not much was mentioned by the interviewees. A good example came from Romania where two friends created lesson plans together so that they could share them even though they were from different schools.

One teacher from Austria noted that the lockdown also had a positive effect on some children's learning. He mentioned that a child with Asperger's Syndrome found it much easier to learn alone than in class and so he will be allowed to learn from home more often even after the pandemic. This solution might have never been found without the lockdown and good cooperation with parents.

Communication with parents did not change much during the pandemic in Estonia and Finland as electronic learning environments have been used as the main communication channels in these countries for many years. The only change was that face-to-face meetings were replaced with virtual meetings, just like in Austria and Romania. Many teachers from Austria found that online meetings with parents were even more effective than face-to-face meetings.

Regarding cooperation facilitation between learners in an online or hybrid context, teachers admitted that they paid relatively little attention to it. One teacher from Austria said that the breakout rooms on Zoom were quite difficult to handle with a group

of students and so group work became an only occasional teaching method. But if there was time left at the end of a lesson, many teachers tried to give students the opportunity to talk to each other instead of switching off the video tool immediately.

In conclusion, we can say that the entire COVID-19 restriction period has been a learning phase for teachers - they have attended short training sessions, watched tutorials online, tried things out and shared their successes and failures with each other. However, they still feel that they need more support in conducting hybrid or distance learning. Many teachers are not happy with the way they are teaching but they do not find time to learn other methods themselves. In particular, they need ideas on how to organise collaborative learning online and how to avoid burnout during hybrid teaching.