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Parents' Opinions about their Children's Distance Learning during the First Wave of the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, distance education became the only official form of instruction in all schools in Croatia for a period commencing 16 March 2020. This situation changed the expectations, roles and responsibilities of parents with regard to the teaching and learning process of their children. Understanding parents' experiences during school closure is important for the development of recommendations for similar situations.

This paper presents part of the results of an online survey investigating the opinions of 1,205 parents of primary school children on various aspects of distance education. The responses were analysed by researchers using the thematic analysis approach. The initial answers of parents regarding the positive and negative aspects of education during the lockdown were grouped into categories. The results indicate that distance education positively contributed to the development of children's self-regulated learning and to providing greater parental support in learning, as well as empowering children in using ICT. Parents emphasise positive changes in the quality of family relationships, which are partly the consequence of joint learning with their children and partly due to changes in the way of life during the lockdown. Negative aspects can be divided into two general categories, the first of which is linked to children (e.g., lack of support from school, lack of children's interest in learning), while the second refers to the challenges faced by parents (e.g., fear of school failure, undertaking the double role of custodian and teacher).

The findings suggest the need for the development of recommendations that would provide support for parents and children in situations where the teaching and learning process take place in an online environment.

Keywords: Covid-19, distance education, parents, primary school

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Mnenja staršev o učenju njihovih otrok na daljavo med prvim valom pandemije covid-19

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≈ Zaradi pandemije covid-19 je izobraževanje na daljavo od 16. marca 2020 naprej postalo edina uradna oblika pouka v vseh šolah na Hrvaškem. Ta situacija je spremenila pričakovanja, vloge in odgovornosti staršev v povezavi s procesom poučevanja in učenja njihovih otrok. Razumevanje izkušenj staršev med zaprtjem šol je pomembno za pripravo priporočil za podobne situacije. V prispevku je predstavljen del rezultatov spletnega vprašalnika, v katerem so bila preučena mnenja 1.205 staršev osnovnošolskih otrok o različnih vidikih izobraževanja na daljavo. Odgovore so raziskovalci analizirali z uporabo pristopa tematske analize. Prvotni odgovori staršev glede pozitivnih in negativnih vidikov izobraževanja med zaprtjem so bili razvrščeni v kategorije. Rezultati kažejo, da je izobraževanje na daljavo pozitivno prispevalo k razvoju otrokovega samoreguliranega učenja in zagotavljanju večje podpore staršev pri učenju ter opolnomočenju otrok pri uporabi IKT. Starši poudarjajo pozitivne spremembe v kakovosti družinskih odnosov, ki so deloma posledica skupnega učenja z otroki, deloma pa so posledica sprememb v načinu življenja med zaprtjem. Negativne vidike lahko razdelimo v dve splošni kategoriji, od katerih je prva povezana z otroki (npr. pomanjkanje podpore šole, pomanjkanje zanimanja otrok za učenje), druga pa se nanaša na izzive, s katerimi se spoprijemajo starši (npr. strah pred šolskim neuspehom, prevzemanje dvojne vloge, tj. skrbnika in učitelja). Ugotovitve kažejo na potrebo po oblikovanju priporočil, ki bi zagotovila podporo staršem in otrokom v situacijah, ko proces poučevanja in učenja poteka v spletnem okolju.

Ključne besede: covid-19, izobraževanje na daljavo, starši, osnovna šola

Introduction

Research context

On 11 March 2020, the World Health Organisation (WHO) (2020, 11 March) declared Covid-19 (SARS-CoV-2) a pandemic. Only two days later, on 13 March, WHO (2020, 13 March) issued an announcement saying that Europe had become the epicentre of the pandemic. On the same day, the Government of the Republic of Croatia issued the *Decision on Suspending Live Teaching at Universities, Secondary and Primary Schools as well as Institutions of Pre-Primary Education and Care and Introducing Distance Online Instruction*, thus making distance education the only official form of instruction at all primary, secondary and tertiary education institutions as of 16 March 2020. In Croatia, a country with a little over four million inhabitants,³ this decision directly affected 755,489 children and youth included in education.⁴ Despite the fact that at the moment of the outbreak of the pandemic, there was no scientific evidence about the risk of spreading Covid-19 in the school environment, many countries implemented school closures nationwide as part of lockdown measures in an effort to slow community transmission of Covid-19 (Yung et al., 2020). According to UNESCO data (2020), by 16 March 2020, as many as 110 countries around the world had announced school closures nationwide, directly affecting 44% of children and youth included in education, from the pre-primary to tertiary level, and by 24 April 2020, the proportion of children affected had grown to 84.5% in 166 countries worldwide. Although schools remained physically closed, teaching and learning had to continue, and given that their closing happened practically overnight, schools, students and their parents were unprepared for the new situation.

Theoretical background

In the traditional (face-to-face) school setting, parents' support and involvement in their children's learning is consistently associated with positive outcomes for children. Research has shown that there is a strong association between the level of parental involvement and higher academic achievement

3 4,058,165 – Population estimate of the Republic of Croatia –
https://www.dzs.hr/Hrv_Eng/publication/2020/07-01-03_01_2020.htm.

4 139,682 – Children in ECEC institutions –
https://www.dzs.hr/Hrv_Eng/publication/2020/08-01-08_01_2020.htm.
312,530 – Primary school students –
https://www.dzs.hr/Hrv_Eng/publication/2020/08-01-02_01_2020.htm.
145,216 – Upper secondary schools students –
https://www.dzs.hr/Hrv_Eng/publication/2020/08-01-03_01_2020.htm.
158,061 – Higher education students –
https://www.dzs.hr/Hrv_Eng/publication/2020/08-01-07_01_2020.htm.

(Callahan et al., 1998; Fan & Chen, 2001; Grolnick et al., 1991; Hill & Taylor, 2004; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Simpkins et al., 2006), school grades (Bandura et al., 1996; Paulson, 1994; Tan & Goldberg, 2009), motivation to learn (D'Ailly, 2003; Seginer, 2006), student behaviour (Cassity & Harris, 2000; Taylor & Machida, 1994) and social-emotional development (Melhuish, 2010; Roy & Giraldo-García, 2018).

Unlike the traditional school setting, which has a structured environment and where students learn in the presence of a teacher, distance education provides students with learning resources, while students themselves decide how and when they will complete their assignments according to their needs and the conditions in which they work. Therefore, parental involvement in student academic activities in an online environment is especially important. Stevens and Borup (2015) claim that it is parents who hold the potential to be the key to achievement in online settings. Although existing research results prove that parental support in distance education is positively related to students' academic success (Borup et al., 2014; Liu et al., 2010), there are also investigations that have proved that parents struggle to understand their own role in their children's online education (Boulton, 2008; Stevens & Borup, 2015). Hasler-Waters (2012) identifies four roles that parents can fulfil to improve student engagement in an online environment: organiser, instructor in the learning process, motivator and manager. For parents to fulfil all or at least some of these roles, they need support in developing awareness of the importance of their role, and in developing efficient ways of supporting their children's learning.

The first step in developing a system of support for parents in these novel pandemic-never-before-seen times is to investigate how parents feel about, or what they think of, online instruction and what kind of problems they encounter. At the beginning of the pandemic, parents found themselves in an unenviable situation. Due to the lockdown, they had to reorganise family life and professional obligations, while simultaneously providing online instruction in their homes. It is customary in Croatia that extended family members help parents in childcare. An investigation conducted by UNICEF (Pećnik, 2013) has shown that about 60% of parents use unpaid assistance from family members and/or friends in matters related to family and children. Risking contracting the disease, people who had been involved in childcare, particularly those belonging to vulnerable and high-risk groups, could no longer provide the previously customary support. The total burden of care for the family (parenthood, help with instruction, housekeeping, professional and financial obligations) became almost exclusively the responsibility of parents, who had to face these completely new challenges.

The aim of the present paper is to investigate the opinions of parents of primary school children (grades 1 to 4) on the positive and negative aspects of distance education during the Covid-19 national lockdown.

Method

Participants

The participants in the study were parents, caregivers and family members of students attending the first four grades of primary school. The research comprised 1,205 examinees, of which 88.2% were mothers, 11% fathers, 0.5% caregivers and 0.3% extended family members who had taken over responsibility for children's learning in the period of the research. The term "parents" will be used hereafter to refer to all of the aforementioned participants in the research. The largest proportion of parents included in the research had an undergraduate, graduate or postgraduate university degree (58.4%), while 38.8% had completed secondary education and just 2.8% had only finished primary education. At the time of the study, most of the parents were employed. During the lockdown, 39% of the parents regularly went to work, while 44.9% worked from home. As many as 15.4% of the parents said they were unemployed and 0.7% were retired.

Instruments

The data presented in this paper are part of a larger study on parents' opinions about distance education in the Republic of Croatia during the lockdown. The questionnaire used in the research consisted of three parts. The first part contained questions on the socio-demographic characteristics of the participants, the second part comprised a five-level intensity scale on which the examinees estimated their agreement with statements related to different components of the difficulty of distance education, and the third part comprised open-ended questions in which parents described/gave their own perspective on the positive and negative changes brought about by distance education. This article presents and interprets the data obtained by means of the analysis of the open-ended questions.

Data collection

The investigation commenced on 16 April 2020, exactly one month after the introduction of distance education. It was carried out until 28 April and the process of data collection was divided into two steps. The first step started on 16 April, when student teachers from the Faculty of Teacher Education, University

of Zagreb, started conducting the survey under the supervision and with the help of the researchers. Prior to that, online training for the student teachers was organised, which included discussion of guidelines prepared earlier regarding the method of data collection and ethical concerns (such as voluntary participation of parents, preserving the anonymity of participants). The survey was carried out by phone and via communication platforms (i.e., Zoom, Skype), whereby student teachers asked the questions from the questionnaire and noted the answers on a corresponding form. The second step of data gathering started on 21 April 2020, when the questionnaire was published as a Google Form on social networks and was made available to all interested parents in the Republic of Croatia until 28 April 2020. Parents from the whole country participated in the research on a voluntary basis.

Data analysis

The data analysis was based on a qualitative approach known as inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis is a method used for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data. In the process of data analysis, the key phases and actions developed by Braun and Clarke (2006) were followed.

The first three steps of data analysis were conducted independently by the two researchers.

- 1) Familiarising with data – multiple reading of answers to the first question (positive characteristics), followed by the answers to the second question (negative characteristics), identifying key words (patterns) and recording observations and ideas.
- 2) Generating initial codes – sorting all data according to key characteristics = codes (key words).
- 3) Searching for themes – the researchers independently grouped the data into themes and assigned them potential names.
In the next steps, the researchers worked together and made a final categorisation and interpretation of qualitative data.
- 4) Reviewing themes – a joint revision was conducted and the themes were agreed upon, i.e., the potential categories for positive and negative characteristics of online teaching were defined and named.
- 5) Defining and naming themes – the specifics of potential themes were analysed and refined, and categories were given their final names; the frequency of appearance in each particular category was established.
- 6) Interpretation of the data obtained.

Results

The answers to the questions about positive and negative changes caused by distance education were analysed using the thematic analysis methodology. The categories of positive and negative changes and their frequency can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1

Positive and negative changes caused by distance education

POSITIVE CHANGES	N	%	NEGATIVE CHANGES	N	%
Self-regulated learning	356	39.12	Children's lack of interest in learning	146	16.08
Improved quality of family relationships	176	19.34	Disrupted quality of family relationships	130	14.32
Benefits of staying at home	120	13.19	Restriction of social contacts	229	25.22
Development of ICT competences	108	11.87	Excessive use of ICT	67	7.38
Parental support in the learning process	85	9.34	Parents' fear of school failure	108	11.90
Teachers' professional involvement	34	3.74	Lack of teacher support	82	9.03
			Overburdening with school tasks	108	11.89
Outliers	31	3.40	Outliers	38	4.18
TOTAL	910	100	TOTAL	908	100

Positive changes caused by distance online teaching

The first question, "Point out one particularly positive thing (change) brought about by distance education", yielded 860 answers (71.37% of the total number of participants). Parents' responses were coded into 910 positive characteristics of distance education, which were distributed into six categories and outliers.

1. Self-regulated learning

Parents mention positive changes in their children's learning referring to independence and responsibility, organisation of learning time, increased competences in various school subjects, as well as learning motivation.

As the biggest advantage of distance education ($N = 175$; 19.23%) parents point out the development of independence and responsibility in their child.

They noticed independence in learning, homework writing and solving tasks.

"I think students have become more responsible and they think more about the duties they have. My child doesn't need to be encouraged to solve tasks, he's learned to work independently."

"My child has learned that she needs to be organised in order to be successful."

Independently creating a daily schedule and good time organisation have ensured more time for play for some children, and more time for solving school tasks without time pressure for others, thus enabling parents and children to follow a rhythm that best suits their needs.

"The child can take all the time s/he needs and is not limited by the bell or the structure of the school day."

Parents notice a visible improvement in the development of mathematical, reading, language and artistic skills, and mention positive changes in attitude towards learning, whereby they particularly emphasise children's motivation and their increased involvement in learning and independence in investigating.

"The child is encouraged to independently search content for learning and investigating."

"The child understands that it's possible to learn in different ways."

2. Improved quality of family relationships

Parents recognise the improved quality of family relationships as a positive consequence of distance education. In their answers, they point out that they spend more one-on-one time with their children, emphasising the value of family togetherness. Parents notice a deepening of family relationships.

"A lot of quality time is spent in the family environment. We enjoy being all together!"

"The bond between father and son is even stronger."

3. Benefits of staying at home

Parents emphasise that one benefit of distance learning is a more pleasant learning atmosphere in which children feel more relaxed, experience a lower level of stress, and say they are more satisfied and happier. An additional relief for children is the absence of travel to school by school bus or public transport. Parents noticed that one of the benefits of distance learning is that children can sleep longer and are more rested during the day. Parents are aware

that distance learning has contributed to preserving their children's health, particularly from the Covid-19 virus, but also from illnesses that children are more prone to contracting when in a group.

"Since distance learning started, they've never been sick."

"Now my child doesn't waste any time on travelling to school."

4. Development of ICT competences

Parents claim that distance learning has prompted the development of digital competences in children. They mention positive changes in the independent use of computers, tablets, mobile phones, computer programs, applications and the use of digital communication channels.

"The child has learned how to use different web tools."

"Developing computer literacy in children has been increasingly fostered. I believe this way of working will benefit our children immensely in handling the challenges of the modern age. We should consider the fact that this way of functioning awaits them one day when they enter the labour market."

5. Parental support in the learning process

Parents see their own involvement in the learning process of their child as one of the benefits of distance learning. This involvement has contributed to seeing their child with different eyes and in a new light, recognising his/her strengths and abilities, but also noticing the difficulties the child faces and the mechanisms the child uses to overcome them. Some parents have gained greater control over what their child does and how s/he does it.

"I have an insight into everything that's happening and how my child approaches learning content."

"As a parent, I'm more involved in the instruction process now. During normal school, I didn't know much about what they did or didn't do. I can follow what my child does and how s/he progresses and the kind of help s/he needs."

6. Teachers' professional involvement

Parents notice the teacher's effort, his/her extra involvement and the quality of communication, as well his/her availability, his/her individualised approach to the child, and the variety of teaching methods and materials used.

"The teacher can dedicate herself to every individual student better than in the classroom, and she organises her teaching practically alone and with her own materials. She handles the new situation wonderfully and has adapted to the children and to all of us."

Distance education has opened a new perspective for parents, which enables them to appreciate the teacher's work more.

"Only now do I realise how difficult and demanding a teacher's job is. Respect and recognition to all teachers who have chosen this profession and who are willing to dedicate their whole lives to children. I can barely handle one child, while they manage more than twenty children on a daily basis in the classroom."

"I can better understand how demanding a teacher's job is. I don't know how she manages to explain maths tasks to him, and then I remember she has twenty more students who need help. Really, respect for her patience and strong nerves."

7. Outliers

This category comprises answers that have a low rate of occurrence and do not belong to any of the aforementioned categories.

"The positive thing is I can recall content I learned in the first grade and I learn a lot with my child."

Negative changes caused by distance education

The second question, "Point out one particularly negative thing (change) brought about by distance education", yielded 870 answers (72.2% of the total number of participants). The parents' responses were coded into 908 negative characteristics of distance education, which were distributed into seven categories and outliers.

1. Lack of interest in learning

Parents mention a number of difficulties with distance learning related to children's lack of motivation for learning. They express their concern about the impossibility of stimulating their children's interest in learning. Due to the lack of physical presence in the school building, children felt as if they were on holiday and school duties were not compulsory. Additionally, parents noticed a lack of concentration and focus, and observed that extended time was needed to complete tasks.

"Lack of attention, weak concentration and no work discipline. Something that would have taken five minutes to solve at school, takes half an hour at home. With time, he gets more and more demotivated."

"My son thinks he is on holiday all the time and doesn't take learning seriously."

“I’d say my child is not too motivated for school and his duties, compared to before. Often during the day, he needs to be reminded to do his tasks and duties he ‘has forgotten’. With this way of work, children are harder to motivate.”

2. Disrupted quality of family relationships

Parents’ comments suggest a deterioration in the quality of family relationships due to the pressure to participate in the education of their children in a new way. They say they are expected to take over the role of teacher, although they lack the necessary competences. Distance education requires parents to spend a lot of time supporting their children’s learning, and also requires time for communication with the teacher.

“The child is confused by the role of the parent, who has performed become a teacher, and this creates a tense child-parent-as-teacher relationship.”

“I don’t spend time with my child as a mum, but as her teacher, while in her free time I work. The mother-daughter relationship isn’t how I imagined it anymore.”

Parents mention the increased level of stress due to overburdening and lack of time, which affects the daily routine of the family.

“It’s terribly stressful to combine work from home with school content. Either the child suffers, or my job does.”

“I’m under stress because I have to do the teacher’s work, which shouldn’t be a parent’s task. We have our children we need to raise and feed, a life, a job. It isn’t easy for us parents to be both parents and teachers simultaneously.”

3. Restriction of social contacts

Parents say that children’s separation from their friends and the impossibility to communicate with classmates and their teacher are a big problem caused by distance education.

“My child complains every day how he misses his friend. He says he can hardly wait to sit at his classroom desk and tell his friend what he was doing while they were at home.”

“After the experience with distance education, I would never home school my child. School content is not a problem, or the ability to teach my own child, but the lack of social interaction with the teacher and peers is a major disadvantage.”

4. Excessive use of digital tools

Parents say that children spend too much time in front of a screen: computer, mobile phone or TV. Some of their comments refer to the negative consequences this has for a child's development and health, such as neck and back pains or tics. Parents feel the pressure of having to be available all the time, since they are expected to participate in doing school assignments and communicate with the teacher and other parents.

"Distance education requires constant use of computers/tablets/mobile phones/TV, which negatively affects my child's health. We all spend too much time in front of screens."

"Excess of technology, constant tension from numerous Viber groups."

5. Parents' fear of school failure

Parents mention that children often seek help with explaining content, and that they do not know how to explain the content in a way appropriate to their children. They notice that children do not understand the content, and that they fall behind or know less. Parents fear that quickly covering new content and moving on without revising it will result in children having gaps in their knowledge. Problems arise due to all of this, such as children's anger about not understanding the content, frustration at having to listen to parents' explanations, dissatisfaction with their own work, confusion and anxiety.

"I'm afraid my child might have permanent gaps in his/her knowledge, which will cause problems in further education."

"Content changes too quickly. There are too many missed things that children will not be able to catch up with later in higher grades."

6. Lack of teacher support

Parents mention the lack of teacher support, referring to teaching, availability, communication and giving feedback. They complain about content being insufficiently explained by the teacher, thus reducing learning to children solving tasks they do not understand on their own, without receiving feedback. Moreover, there is no direct communication between children and teachers. Teachers communicate only with parents.

"The child receives absolutely no materials that would help him/her solve tasks, but only the tasks that need to be completed."

"Children have no classes, they just do tasks. The content is not explained and they have simply lost this year. The teacher is not committed enough, not interested, inaccessible and is almost never available for our questions."

7. Overburdening with school tasks

As many as 11.89% of parents' comments refer to children being overburdened during distance learning. Parents notice their children require more time to solve tasks in distance learning than in face-to-face learning. Children are assigned a larger number of various tasks, which are very time demanding

"They have to independently learn the content that they would otherwise do at school, and have to do the homework in addition, which takes all day – every day and during the weekends."

"Now the child is required to spend more time on distance learning than was customary when going to school."

8. Outliers

This category comprises answers that have a low rate of occurrence and do not belong to any of the aforementioned categories.

"There are frequent quarrels between siblings, because they cannot both watch or do what they want simultaneously."

Discussion

The purpose of the study was to investigate parents' perceptions of the positive and negative sides of distance education during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The categories obtained show that parents observed positive and negative sides of distance education, which refer to children's learning, family relationships, relationships with others, ICT, involvement of teachers, and parental involvement in children's learning. Thus, the six categories that refer to positive aspects can be observed in contrast to the six categories referring to negative aspects of distance education. The analysis yielded a separate category *Overburdening with school tasks*, whose content unequivocally indicates the problems parents and their children encountered during distance education.

Overburdening with school tasks

Parents noticed an inadequacy regarding the difficulty of the content, the complexity of instructions, and the quantity of tasks for independent solving. Completing various tasks (e.g., creating posters, experiments, picture books, projects and artwork) requires a lot of time, and frequently involves materials that are not available to children or parents during lockdown. Since the participants were parents of six- to ten-year-old children (attending first to fourth grade of primary school), some of the children encountered such tasks for the first time during distant learning, and had not developed the knowledge and

the skills necessary to understand how to process and approach such tasks. The lack of procedural skills the children were supposed to have acquired earlier rendered the process of learning additionally difficult, as students had to acquire new content, as well as new methods and working techniques simultaneously.

In Croatia, a study was conducted on the experiences and satisfaction of students with online education in the seventh grade of primary school (IDIZ, 2020). The results demonstrated that the majority of the 973 students from the sample (71%) maintained that online education represented a higher burden in relation to traditional classroom education, due to the greater number of tasks they had to solve in a short period of time and the major effort required to solve the tasks. Although the research involved opinions of somewhat older students, these results are in harmony with the opinions of parents of younger students. In other words, the quantity and complexity of the tasks, as well as their degree of challenge in the online environment, is an important issue for further research in the Croatian educational context.

Developing self-regulated learning vs. Lack of interest in learning

Parents highlight the development of self-regulation in learning, which includes the development of students' independence and responsibility, the successful organisation of learning time, the successful realisation of learning outcomes, motivation, and the development of coping mechanisms for dealing with new situations. The importance of developing and sustaining a routine in learning and solving tasks despite the new situation is emphasised in other studies that investigate parents' perception of distance education (Bhamani et al., 2020; Romero et al., 2020). Taking responsibility for learning is considered to be the foundation for building working habits in the future.

On the other hand, some parents observe that due to distance education, their children have lost interest in and motivation for learning, and they do not take it as seriously as teaching and learning carried out in school. Comparable results were obtained by Garbe et al. (2020), who found that parents noticed a lack of learning motivation in children, which was specifically due to distance education. This lack of learning motivation may represent an additional, new challenge for teachers upon their return to school.

Improved quality of family relationships vs. Disrupted quality of family relationships

Parents recognise an improvement in the quality of family relationships as a positive consequence of distance education, which is consistent with the results obtained by Dong et al. (2020), who also identified an improvement

of the parent-child relationship during Covid-19 online education. Riffle et al. (2020) indicate the possibility of a positive shift in parent-child relationships in unexpected situations, showing that even in adverse situations, positive outcomes and personal growth can be observed. Brown et al. (2020) claim that isolation during the lockdown corresponded with parents spending more time with their children. Romero et al. (2020) maintain that social bonding was positively affected by what they call focused parenting. From their research it is also possible to assume that parents who show characteristics of focused parenting, such as a soothing attitude and providing emotional comfort for the child, recognised the positive characteristics of distance education, which contributed to an improved quality of family relationships. Negative features caused by distance education disrupting the quality of family relationships refer to confusion about known/present family roles, where the double role of parents in the process of education (parent and teacher) is particularly emphasised. Parents warn that their children express dissatisfaction and frustration because they think their parents “play the role of teacher”, and for that reason they sometimes refuse cooperation. Garbe et al. (2020) have come to a similar conclusion and point out that parents have become surrogate teachers, which is not suitable for all children. Moreover, parents feel a high level of overburdening due to the quantity of time and effort they must invest in working with their child to enable him/her to follow online teaching. Parents who work from home emphasise the impossibility of fulfilling their professional obligations and reduced professional productivity. Those who go to work on a daily basis express their dissatisfaction with teachers not understanding the situation they found themselves in, which implies that they make up for children’s obligations in the late afternoon and evening hours and during weekends, since the children cannot do their school tasks independently without their support. Similar challenges are emphasised by American parents, who point out that, for them, the additional responsibility during distance education resulted in a feeling of high pressure (Garbe et al., 2020).

Benefits of staying at home vs. Restriction of social contacts

Parents recognised both the advantages and disadvantages of staying at home during isolation. The benefits refer to a more pleasant learning atmosphere, but also to a better possibility of rest. On the other hand, parents claim that isolation reduced the social contacts that are so important for the social and emotional development of children. During the lockdown, parents became more aware of the role of school in the development of social and emotional competences of children, and of the potential consequences of the lockdown, to

which they had paid less attention earlier. These are the potential consequences for child mental health to which Loades et al. (2020) refer, emphasising that social isolation increases the risk of mental health problems like depression and anxiety after enforced isolation ends. Moreover, Bhamani et al. (2020, p. 17) point out that “Schools play a huge role in disciplining and polishing social skills; remote learning has taken away that opportunity from children. [...] Going to school is not only about subject learning, but also social relationship and peer to peer interaction along with developing social skills.”

Meaningful use of ICT vs. Excessive use of ICT

Parents recognised the meaningful use of ICT for the purpose of learning. They mention new tools/applications that students had not used before (for example, Matific, Worldwall), and that now significantly help them with learning. They also mention the communication platforms (such as MS Teams or Zoom) used by students for conversations with teachers and peers. They emphasise the possibility of real-time communication as a particular benefit of these platforms.

Negative comments related to ICT use in distance education refer to the excessive use of technological gadgets (mobile phones, tablets, laptops) and the long hours their children spend in front of screens. It is interesting to mention that some parents observe that before the lockdown children frequently used digital equipment in their leisure time, and that now, combined with distance education, screen time has become alarmingly high, which is why some children have begun to develop health problems. Parents' concern regarding too much screen time is expressed in other research findings (Park & Winchester, 2020), including its negative influence on children's health, particularly on their sight (Dong et al., 2020).

Parental support in learning vs. Parents' fear of school failure

During distance education, parents in Croatia became more actively involved in their children's school obligations and learning. For the first time, some of them faced certain learning problems that their children encounter and perceived the kind of support their children need. Due to a higher level of involvement, parents noticed the strengths and weaknesses in the ways their children approach learning, and attempted to adapt their support to their needs.

Parents expressed concern about their own lack of time, about not being acquainted with the content and the methods they could use to explain appropriately to their children content that remained unclear in distance education. They fear that children will not be able to catch up on unachieved learning

outcomes once they return to school. They are also afraid that upon their return to school, the teachers will not check the achievement of the planned learning outcomes or provide additional compensation mechanisms for their fulfilment, which may result in failure in further education.

Teacher's involvement vs. Lack of teacher's support

Only 3.74% of the responses refer to the positive characteristics of teacher's work in distance education, which includes quality communication and adapting learning materials and tasks to students' needs and abilities. A significantly higher number of responses (9.03%) refer to the lack of adequate teacher support during distance education. Statements such as "*Teaching is not just assigning tasks, it is necessary to explain content and procedures beforehand*" are frequent, which means that some teachers see distance education as mere task-assigning for independent work, while other elements of teaching are absent. In Croatia, TV-school was provided for every grade for one hour per day, and it is probable that some teachers interpreted TV-education as "work in the classroom" and simply formulated additional assignments for students' independent work. Research carried out by Park and Winchester (2020) points to the same problem, warning that distance education fails to provide time for explanation and deeper understanding of concepts and procedures.

Limitations

The present study was carried out during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic crisis and during the national lockdown, hence there were significant limitations. The research was conducted by phone and online including parents who participated voluntarily. Thus, the sample is not representative. The sample included parents with higher than average education (58.4% higher education level) and those who are active on social networks. The questionnaire used in the research was constructed *ad hoc*, based on the researchers' familiarity with the context in which they live and the specific needs created by the new situation. Thus, the results of the study cannot be generalised, but can be used as a starting point for further research into parents' opinions on distance education using a representative sample, i.e., also including those categories of parents that were not included in this research. Furthermore, future research should use other methods of data collection (such as face-to-face interview techniques) and revise and expand the number of items in the interview.

Conclusions

The Covid-19 pandemic has caused drastic changes in people's lives worldwide, including Croatia. Restricted movement and, consequently, restrictions in performing everyday activities have resulted in powerful changes in the way of life as it had existed until that moment. The way of education changed overnight from the traditional school setting to a distance education setting. The implementation of distance education as the only form of teaching in primary education in pandemic conditions is a totally new experience, requiring scientific research. Besides students and teachers, parents are crucial stakeholders in the education process. Parents took over new roles in the teaching and learning process of their children not known until then. It is therefore important to understand their experiences and opinions about distance education.

The present study has shown that parents do not have black-or-white opinions on distance education, but notice both positive and negative elements influencing their children's learning, their family relationships, relationships with others, the use of new technologies, the teacher's role, and their own involvement in their children's education.

The difficulties Croatian parents faced in distance education have been identified in other research performed during the lockdown (Bhamani et al., 2020; Brown et al., 2020; Dong et al., 2020; Garbe et al., 2020; Park & Winchester, 2020; Romero et al., 2020). The main difficulties refer to a decrease in learning motivation, too much time spent on completing assignments, excessive use of digital technologies, parents taking over the teacher's role, disturbances in family relationships, and the lack of social contact with peers. These findings suggest the need to create recommendations for parents and teachers at different levels. At the policy level, clear recommendations are required for teachers, defining guidelines for distance teaching. It is particularly important that every school operationalise the policy-level guidelines according to the context in which it acts and make them available to all parents and the interested public. All of the teachers employed in each particular school should be included in creating guidelines at the school level. Guidelines for parents should be developed according to the same model. It is important that parents participate in creating the recommendations in order to ensure that their perspective and life context is respected. Clearly defined roles and expectations for teachers and parents would enable better mutual communication and reduce the possibility of the appearance of "blame the teacher" or "blame the parents" situations and would open space for cooperation that would eventually lead to achieving the desired educational outcomes for children.

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