

# Secondary School Students' Experience with Online Lessons during the First Two Waves of the COVID-19 Pandemic

*Silvia Barnová<sup>1</sup>, Slávka Krásna<sup>2</sup>, Zuzana Geršicová<sup>3</sup>*

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## *Abstract*

In the proposed paper, the authors present the results of a questionnaire survey on Slovak secondary school students' experiences gained during the first two waves of the COVID-19 pandemic. Two questionnaire surveys have been carried out within an ongoing research project focused on the limits of online learning in secondary schools and on new opportunities brought by the involuntary transfer from school-based to distance learning during the pandemic crisis. The research sample consists of secondary school students who, in June 2020, were questioned about their experiences with online lessons during the first wave of the pandemic, and, in the academic year 2020/2021, a questionnaire on their experiences gained during the second pandemic wave was administered to them. Even though the results point to certain issues and fields which need to be improved, students showed overall satisfaction with the live-streamed lessons during the first two waves of the COVID-19 pandemic.

## *Keywords:*

Secondary schools  
Students  
COVID-19  
Distance learning  
Online teaching

## 1 Introduction

Currently, the Slovak school system - as well as the whole population - is struggling with the third COVID-19 pandemic wave. Even though the situation is getting worse, it has not come to school closures yet, but there is still the eventuality of closing schools several days before the winter holidays start - if not countrywide then in certain regions at least. So, there is a risk that it will come to a certain reduction of educational opportunities and a decrease in the quality of teaching (Zapletal, Jankovičová, & Kloknerová, 2021, Andres, et al, 2021) again, and the situation observed in school years 2019/2020 and 2020/2021 will repeat itself in a slightly different scenario. Therefore, it is very important to pay attention to things we learned during the first two waves of the pandemic when all schools in the country were closed for several months and to point out the necessity of taking measures in order to provide sufficient support and guidance to teachers, students, as well as students' parents.

<sup>1</sup> DTI University, Ul. Sládkovičova 533/20, 018 41 Dubnica nad Váhom, Slovak Republic.

E-mail: [barnova@dti.sk](mailto:barnova@dti.sk)

<sup>2</sup> DTI University, Ul. Sládkovičova 533/20, 018 41 Dubnica nad Váhom, Slovak Republic.

<sup>3</sup> DTI University, Ul. Sládkovičova 533/20, 018 41 Dubnica nad Váhom, Slovak Republic.

## 2 Overview of the situation in Slovak schools during the first and second pandemic waves

In Slovakia, after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, all schools and school facilities in the country were closed on March 16, 2020 and schools – in order to ensure continuity of education – had to develop their own distance teaching strategies (Lajčín & Porubčanová, 2021), as they received neither sufficient information nor any useful guidance from the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic. They most frequently opted for four basic strategies: 1. working with worksheets and handouts (e-mail, personal delivery or using applications, providing feedback), 2. individual consultations (Skype, WhatsApp, Messenger, telephone, text messages, etc.), 3. interactive online education (live-streaming); 4. combination of the above (Barnová, Krásna, & Gabrhelová, 2020). It must be noted that only a very limited number of schools applied live-streaming from the very beginning but in many schools, there were teachers, who despite the school strategy of written communication with students decided to deliver online lessons (Barnová, 2021).

Most pandemic restrictive measures were repealed in June 2020, when schools re-opened, and gradually, all students could return to schools, but they were allowed to complete the school year in their home environments online as well. Surprisingly, there was quite a big group of especially older students who opted for distance learning, which can be explained by the fact that they could return to schools only 7 working days before the summer holidays started.

Like in other countries, there were certain groups of students (e.g. students from marginalized Roma communities, groups of students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, students living in remote areas, etc.) having no or limited access to the Internet (online lessons and/or resources) also in Slovakia, and not all of them returned to schools after school re-opening. Therefore, the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic – in line with the recommendations by UNESCO (2020) - decided to implement the idea of summer schools in order to mitigate the impact of school closures on students and to stabilize classroom-based education. Undoubtedly, summer schools could represent a great opportunity for students with no or very limited access to education in their households during the crisis to fill their gaps in learning, but the efficiency of that initiative remains questionable. Based on available data, we can claim that summer schools did not help schools to reach those students who needed it most. Approximately 22% of all students in Slovakia were offline during the first wave of the pandemic. Even though no exact data on this issue are available, it is estimated that only 2 - 8% of all offline students attended summer schools (Centrum vzdelávacích analýz, 2021). Another issue is that there were also schools that provided leisure time activities instead of serious learning opportunities during the three summer school cycles.

Although experts forecast the outbreak of a new COVID-19 pandemic wave in autumn 2020, the school year 2020/2021 started as usually. In October, the situation became dramatic and pandemic restrictive measures were put in place again. On October 12, 2020, all higher secondary schools were closed and on October 26, 2020, they were followed by lower secondary schools. The situation in schools differed from what they had experienced during the first pandemic wave, on November 3, 2020, classroom-based education was allowed for small groups (5+1) of students with special educational needs, on November 10, 2020, all lower secondary schools and on November 16, 2020 also higher secondary schools re-opened for disadvantaged students, which means that the most vulnerable groups were not excluded from education (Barnová, Krásna, Gabrhelová, & Barna, 2021). On December 7, 2020, all students could return to primary and secondary schools but only for a few days. After the winter holidays, classroom-based education was interrupted again. Starting from February 8, 2021, primary and lower secondary education were provided to small groups of students (5+1) with no access to online education. School re-opening started on April 12, 2021 and from April 26, 2021, all schools were open again in accordance with the regional COVID Automat and the tier of the warning system (Barnová, Krásna, Gabrhelová, & Dušek, 2021).

## 3 Methodology

Within an ongoing larger research project, two questionnaire surveys focusing on secondary students' experiences with online learning during school closures have been carried out so far. The project team's aim is to investigate the impact of the involuntary transfer from school-based to distance teaching on students' learning activities and their overall learning experience. The research sample consists of secondary school students who, in June 2020, were questioned about their experience with an online lesson during the first wave of the COVID-

19 pandemic, and, in the school year 2020/2021, a questionnaire on their experiences gained during the second pandemic wave was administered to them.

### 3.1 Questionnaire survey in 2020

Following the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, a questionnaire on secondary school students' experiences with distance learning in the academic year 2019/2020 was administered. One part of the questionnaire consisted of open-ended items with the purpose to find out about the benefits and the shortcoming of live-streaming lessons during the first pandemic wave. The findings showed that students pointed out the following advantages of distance learning: a) comfort given by not leaving their households; b) opportunities for using digital technologies more frequently for learning; c) continuity of learning during school closures was maintained; d) changes in the timetable – shorter and fewer lessons; and e) maintaining at least technology-mediated contact with their teachers and classmates. Even though the results showed students' overall satisfaction with online education during the first pandemic wave, from the aspect of students, the drawbacks of online learning were as follows: a) too much homework (compared with classroom-based education); 2. technical issues; 3. problems with understanding certain topics online; 4. behaviour issues during online lessons; 5. dissatisfaction with the adapted timetable (Barnová, Krásna, Gabrhelová, & Čepelová, 2020).

### 3.2 Research tool

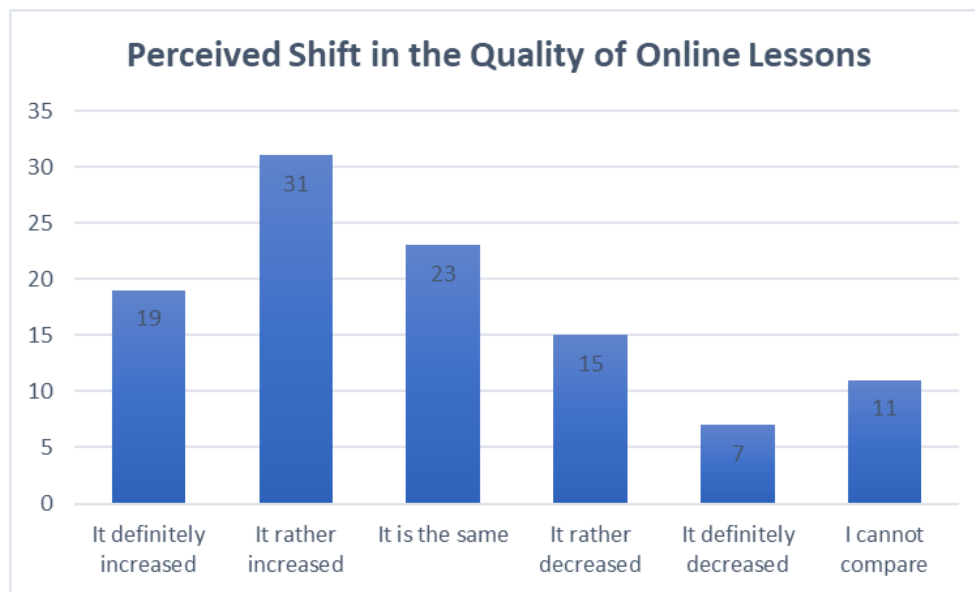
Based on the assumption that during the second pandemic wave, schools and teachers could apply their knowledge and experience gained in the school year 2019/2020, the project team expected an increase in the quality of interactive online teaching. To verify the above assumption, the project team conducted a questionnaire survey on students' newly gained experiences with online learning in the school year 2020/2021. The research was conducted in the same private school on a sample of 106 students, the majority of whom also participated in the questionnaire survey in the year 2020.

For the purposes of the survey, a new questionnaire for students was designed. The questionnaire consists of 19 closed-ended and open-ended items. The research team's aim was to gather quantitative data but also gain information about the participants' experiencing, to get an insight into the factors influencing their attitudes, etc., by means of methods of qualitative research. Bellow, only the partial results of the survey, relevant to the scope of the paper, are presented.

## 4 Result

In the presented questionnaire survey, students were asked about their newly gained distance learning experiences. The project team was particularly interested in their subjective evaluation of the quality of online learning. Students were asked to compare selected aspects of distance learning during the first and the second waves of the pandemic. Our intention was to find out about the existence of a qualitative shift in any aspect of the quality of distance education.

In the first part of the questionnaire, the respondents were asked about the perceived quality of online education in the school year 2020/2021. As displayed in Figure 1, 50 (47.16%) participants observed a positive shift in the quality of lessons. Surprisingly, a negative shift was indicated by an unexpectedly high portion of students - 22 (20.75%).



**Fig. 1: Perceived shift in the quality of online lessons – school years 2019/2020 – 2020/2021.**

In two open-ended questions, the respondents were asked about things that had improved since the first wave of the pandemic, but also things that got worse in the school year 2020/2021. Based on the students' opinions, improvement in the following fields could be observed: a) distance learning was less stressful for students during the second wave of the pandemic as they were familiar with MS Teams, they knew what to expect, and behavioural issues occurred in virtual classrooms less frequently; b) the quality of teaching improved, the educational process was more efficient – teachers were more experienced in using MS Teams, they used projects, interactive games and activities more frequently, and provided students with more resources; c) the timetable for online lessons was almost the same as for classroom-based education and the “school day” was better organized; d) communication between teachers and students improved and it was much easier and faster to join sessions compared with the previous school year; and e) less frequent technical issues. Even though some students were very satisfied and provided answers like “Everything was perfect!”; “I felt like in our real classroom.”; or “Everything improved.”; there were also students who did not see any improvement.

It can be considered a positive finding that according to as many as 28.4% of the respondents, nothing got worse if the quality of education during the two pandemic waves was compared. Other participants complained about a) long hours spent in front of screens as the lessons were longer and they also had more lessons – some students commented on the uselessness of certain subjects; b) their teachers' loss of motivation to teach online and about an observed negative shift in their approach, which was reflected in the way they interacted with their students; c) problems with staying focused and concentrated online; d) behaviour issues and new excuses for a range of situations, e.g. for having cameras turned off; and e) technical issues.

In the context of the above two open-ended questions and the respondents' answers related to the quality of their teachers' work, students' opinions regarding their teachers' preparedness to teach online are interesting. They were asked whether their teachers' online teaching skills had improved. Their answers are displayed in Figure 2.

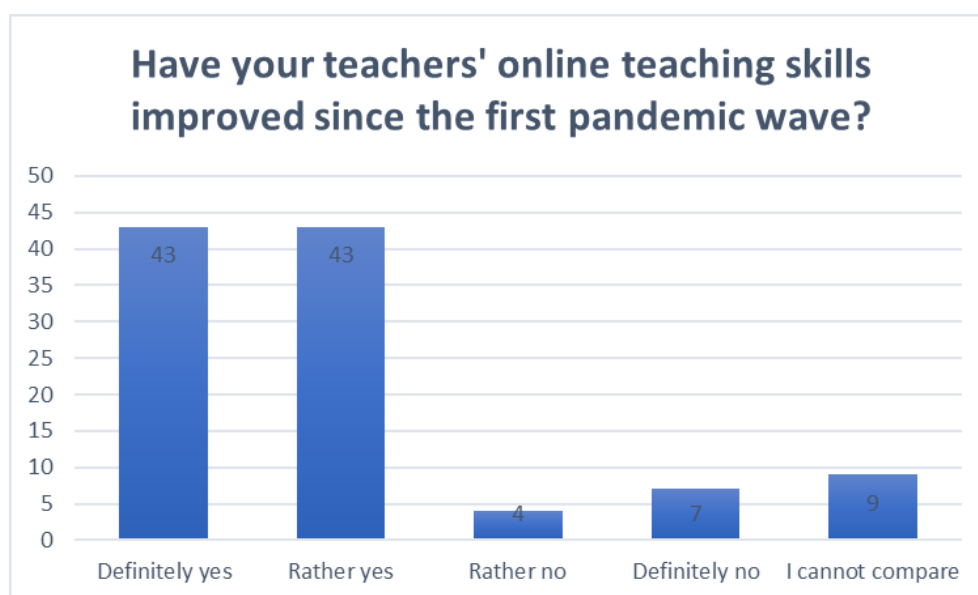


Fig. 2: Perceived improvement in the field of teachers' online teaching skills – school years 2019/2020 – 2020/2021.

Even though several students complained about their teachers' work, the vast majority (86 – 79.9%) of them observed a certain level of improvement in the field.

The above findings indicate that distance learning has become a natural part of students' educational experience, it is no more perceived as a novelty. If their responses following the first and the second pandemic waves are compared, it can be assumed that they lost their enthusiasm, students are tired from being isolated in their home environments and learning without direct, personal contact with their teachers and peers. On the other hand, online learning is not stressful for them anymore. It is a positive finding that following the second pandemic wave, only one student indicated problems with understanding educational content presented online, as in the school year 2019/2020, such a problem occurred in more students.

## 5 Conclusions

After the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent massive school closures in 2020, experts emphasized the high probability of the occurrence of new pandemic waves and of a similar situation in schools in the near future. Therefore, they called for crisis planning in the field of education. Even though our earlier research findings show that teachers were not provided with sufficient learning opportunities by the state between the two pandemic waves (Barnová, Krásna, & Gabrhelová, 2021), the above-presented results indicate the existence of a positive shift in the quality of online lessons from the aspect of students. Due to limitations given by the size and the composition of the research sample, the presented results cannot be generalized to the whole population, therefore, further research in the field is needed.

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