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# Post-Pandemic Reflections on Pedagogy Students' Preparation for Working with Early Education Pupils

*Postpandemiczne refleksje na temat przygotowania studentów pedagogiki do pracy z dziećmi w wieku szkolnym i wczesnoszkolnym*

**Abstract:** The article presents the results of preliminary research connected with the students' experience of high education during the COVID-19 pandemic. The aim of this paper is to introduce the meaning of this experience for the students' future professional activities with early years education pupils. The quantitative online survey was conducted with 110 participants: pedagogy master degree students. The original online questionnaire was sent individually to each participant. The survey was based on a sample of university students who were fairly homogeneous in socio-demographic determinants, e.g. sex and age, thus, the advanced statistical analyzes could not be done. According to the data collected from closed questions, the results were presented in a form of tables. The data from the open-ended questions were subjected to a comprehensive qualitative analysis, as a result, the specific categories of answers were identified. The conclusions show clearly that the participants divide their study experience during the COVID-19 pandemic into positive and negative. There is a slight predominance of the negative experience. What is crucial, the participants consider these experiences as significant for their future profession and the process of working with a child and its family. The conducted research shows that further analysis of this experience, both by students and academic staff, is essential for the study of the teachers' socio-emotional competences. There can be no doubt about the value of such competences in supporting a child in its development.

**Keywords:** COVID-19 pandemic; students' educational experience; socio-emotional competences; early education

**Abstrakt:** W artykule omówiono wyniki pilotażowych badań dotyczących studiowania w okresie pandemii COVID-19. W badaniu wzięło udział 110 studentów pedagogiki drugiego stopnia przygotowujących się do pracy z dzieckiem na wczesnych etapach jego edukacji. W projekcie tym wykorzystano autorski kwestionariusz ankiety online, który został przesłany w formie linku indywidualnie do każdego uczestnika badania. Grupa studentów uczestniczących w badaniu była homogeniczna pod względem cech społeczno-demograficz-

nych, dlatego zaawansowane analizy statystyczne nie mogły być wykonane. Na podstawie zebranych danych z pytań zamkniętych utworzono rozkłady liczebności przedstawione w formie tabel. Dane uzyskane z pytań otwartych zostały poddane analizie jakościowej, w wyniku której wyodrębniono konkretne kategorie odpowiedzi. Wnioski wskazują jednoznacznie, że uczestnicy dzielą swoje doświadczenia związane ze studiowaniem w okresie pandemii COVID-19 na pozytywne i negatywne, z nieznaczną przewagą tych drugich. Jednocześnie interpretują te doświadczenia jako ważne z perspektywy przyszłego zawodu oraz pracy z dzieckiem i jego rodziną. Przeprowadzone badania pozwalają wnioskować, że dalsza analiza tych doświadczeń – zarówno przez studentów, jak i przez kadrę akademicką – może stać się punktem wyjścia do dyskusji o rozwoju kompetencji społecznych przyszłych pedagogów, wspierających ucznia w realizacji kluczowych zadań rozwojowych na etapie dzieciństwa.

**Słowa kluczowe:** pandemia COVID-19; doświadczenia studentów pedagogiki; kompetencje społeczne; wczesna edukacja

## INTRODUCTION

Among the many challenges of contemporary reality, which a person is facing, there is a need for permanent development and following the emerging changes. They seem to be crucial from the perspective of the so-called life success and achieving psychological well-being. The main thesis of the psychology of life span development is that human development is possible throughout life, but not every individual needs to develop. I assume that continuous development is not only possible, but necessary in order for a person to fully understand the world around him or her and consciously use the resources it contains. Childhood is a time of mastering many new skills in a relatively short period of time, establishing new social relationships with both peers and adults, and entering new and more complex social environments (Brzezińska et al., 2016, p. 244). When it comes to discovering this world and better understanding it and themselves, teachers, educators, and tutors who accompany students throughout their education play an important role. They prepare them not only for independence in a changing world, but they also have to change and constantly search for new methods of working with their pupils. The experiences gained in the subsequent phases of childhood will form the basis of the forming personality, especially identity.

Children develop from egocentric individuals, unaware of any perspective other than their own, into sophisticated social-cognitive theorists, able to take several perspectives in thought and compare each with the point of view that other people would take (Shaffer, Kipp, 2020, pp. 371–380). Children play an active role in their psychosocial development, and social interactions with both peers and adults are crucial for them. Using social comparisons by observing their caregivers' reactions to new situations, they learn to respond appropriately, including recognizing their own emotions as well as those of others. They need available, stable, and predict-

able adults to safely explore the world. School is a special place for a child's development where a young person should discover and build his or her own potential through a variety of activities displayed by teachers.

In March 2020, universities in Poland switched to online education without being fully prepared for it either in material or human terms. A great process of transferring traditional education from offline to online has begun, along with verifying digital and social competences of teachers and students. The time has come when modern technologies became an indispensable partner for the entities involved in the process of educating pedagogical staff (Winiarczyk, Warzocha, 2021, p. 62). The COVID-19 pandemic outlined a new framework for the educational reality of higher education. On the one hand, this change seemed simple: instead of coming to the university we will meet in virtual classes, but on the other hand, it mobilized the world of science to analyze how and what it teaches future educators, with what skills and knowledge it sends its graduates to work in schools. Currently, we are dealing with a system in which one third of a person's active life is devoted to education and two thirds to work. In today's world, as Cellary writes, this system is untenable, especially under the influence of new technologies, related changes, and above all new conditions of human development and functioning. Therefore, there is a need for a systemic approach to educating people throughout their lives after they have finished education at a certain level. This is especially true for highly educated people, because the requirements of the labor market will change the fastest for them (Cellary, 2020, p. 17). For future educators working with the child in the early stages of his/her development, it means systematic professional development and development of their educational skills, practically throughout the entire period of professional activity. Therefore, it becomes crucial to prepare students of pedagogy to constantly work on themselves and be ready to take on new tasks in a rapidly changing reality, of which the COVID-19 pandemic is a perfect example. The last two years have brought numerous scientific publications on higher education during the pandemic (e.g. Winiarczyk, Warzocha, 2021; Romaniuk, Łukasiewicz-Wieleba, 2020; Peimani, Kamalipour, 2021; Farnell et al., 2021; Madalińka-Michalak, 2020; Łaszczyk, 2020). These studies focused primarily on changes in the organization of the student learning process and the transfer of all tasks into virtual space.

The aim of this article is to present the results of research on studying in times of pandemic, in the perspective of new challenges that await educators preparing to work with children at early stages of their development in a rapidly changing social, economic and political reality. Due to the importance of the issue and its complex nature, the research should be considered preliminary. The collected data, combined with the analysis of the results of similar studies that are available in the literature, may become an important point in developing recommendations on

what social competencies, knowledge and skills should be developed by educators working with students at the early stages of their education. The dynamics of socio-economic changes in today's globalized world makes it necessary to search and design new methods of working with students and to introduce innovative and creative solutions. Future educators must be adequately prepared to fulfill this task.

## METHODOLOGICAL ASSUMPTIONS

The main objective of the conducted study was to find out the experiences of second-level pedagogy students related to remote education during the first twelve months of the pandemic (March 2020 – March 2021). The study was survey-based, voluntary and anonymous, with 110 participants. A diagnostic survey method was provided in the study. An intentionally designed survey questionnaire was used, which was distributed by e-mail in the form of a link. The results were sent back collectively while maintaining full anonymity of the students. The participants also received brief information about the study and its purpose emphasizing the voluntary nature of participation as well as the absence of any gratification for completing the survey. Students completed the surveys between April 1 and June 1, 2021.

The survey consisted of three parts: a metric, twenty-two closed questions, and four open-ended questions. The main research problem was formulated as follows: what experiences of remote education during the COVID-19 pandemic do students of pedagogy at the University of Gdańsk have? Specific research questions were also identified:

1. How do respondents rate their knowledge of the COVID-19 pandemic and was it helpful in coping with the difficulties of this period?
2. What new problems related to study and work do the subjects indicate?
3. What psychological needs of the participants were in deprivation?
4. What kind of support did the academic staff give to the students?
5. What additional sources of support do the respondents mention in their statements?
6. What new challenges do the respondents identify in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic?

## CHARACTERISTICS OF THE STUDY GROUP

The study involved 107 women (97.3%) and 3 men (2.7%); the arithmetic average age was 25.3 years (with a standard deviation of 5.4), the median was 24 years, the youngest respondent was 21 years old, and the oldest respondent was 51 years

old. All subjects were participants in the MSc in Pedagogy II degree program at the University of Gdańsk: 54 persons were from the first year of MSU studies, 56 persons from the second year. The research was addressed to students of last years of studies, because they will soon begin their professional work in schools. The research was conducted in June–July 2021.

## DATA ANALYSIS

Since the study group was homogeneous in terms of socio-demographic characteristics such as age and gender, among others, advanced statistical analyses could not be performed. On the basis of data derived from closed questions (1–22), distributions of numbers were created and presented in graphical form as bar charts and pie charts. The remaining questions (23–26) were open – the data was subjected to qualitative analysis, as a result of which specific response categories were extracted, presented later in the article. Based on the metric data, the arithmetic average, median and standard deviation of the age of study participants were calculated, as well as the numbers and percentages of representatives of both genders in the sample.

## SURVEY RESULTS

When asked to assess their knowledge about the pandemic and the COVID-19 virus, the vast majority (90% of respondents) declare its high level. The respondents in their statements emphasize that they have the necessary information to understand what is happening in the surrounding reality, and this knowledge helps them to solve current difficulties (65%). In the group of future teachers, the cognitive strategy they use in the current situation is clearly visible, they look for information from various sources (mainly the Internet: 92 respondents), analyze and verify them, which gives a good basis for creative solutions to educational problems that will appear on their professional path. Pedagogical practice provides numerous examples of multidimensional psychosocial problems that affect students in the early stages of their education. Children who display difficult behaviors very often experience school failure. Their cognitive potential is sometimes significantly limited, which, in turn, causes the emergence of problems with meeting school requirements (Jerzak, Zając, 2013, p. 389). Working with students with special educational needs in the early stages of development, based on a multidisciplinary diagnosis, creates a real chance to improve their functioning at school and obtain adequate support in the implementation of developmental tasks.

Students emphasized the negative changes that have occurred in their lives due to the pandemic and the need to follow sanitary rules. Among them the most dominant are: isolation and staying only at home (75 out of 110 respondents), lack of contact with friends (73 out of 110 respondents) and a significant increase in time spent online (67 out of 110). The changes indicated by the respondents became for many of them the source of negative consequences such as: excessive worrying, increased appetite, clearly perceived fear and anxiety, or sleep disturbances.

It is worth noting that nearly 25% of the respondents did not indicate any negative change in their functioning, which seems to confirm the thesis of using cognitive strategy in the situation of deprivation of needs, which was the lockdown period. Students of pedagogy in a crisis situation activate their resources, especially their cognitive resources. This is an important factor supporting the achievement of educational goals in work with children, from the perspective of future professional work and related tasks. In the context of the dynamically occurring changes in socio-economic reality, one of the basic goals of education at each stage of education is to develop the cognitive independence of students (Kochanowska, 2017, p. 181). Hence, building cognitive independence, understood as creative problem solving, as well as active search for solutions, in future teachers during their studies becomes crucial.

Eighty-three individuals (76% of respondents) indicated that their academic performance did not deteriorate during the COVID-19 pandemic. This, combined with the self-efficacy mentioned above, proper organization of one's activities, and motivation to succeed, was a clear counterbalance to a number of adverse factors that emerged during this period. Respondents' answers to the open-ended question (How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected your studies?) can be divided into three categories – negative, neutral, and positive. Table 1 presents examples of these responses.

Thirty-six respondents (33%) noted insecurity in the pandemic, while 57% of students noted loneliness. The COVID-19 pandemic had a very strong yet widespread impact on young people's functioning, mental health and well-being (Pyżalski, 2021). At the same time, the respondents emphasized the fact that they made efforts to activate their own resources and did not seek professional psychological support, as indicated by 87% of the students surveyed. This self-reliance in finding solutions in the situation of a specific psychological burden provides a good foundation for the development of this skill, important in working with students at early stages of their development. Parents and friends – the key people from whom the respondents obtained support, as well as often engaged in conversations about the pandemic situation – were indicated by 89 (81%) and 83 people (75%), respectively. This was followed by the respondents mentioning: university colleagues and other relatives (this was a question with the option to select more

than one answer). Students were also asked to identify changes in their functioning that they associate with the COVID-19 pandemic. The responses were divided, as in the previous open-ended question, into three categories: negative, neutral and positive changes. The most common types of answers are presented in Table 2.

Table 1. Dominant examples of answers to the question: How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected your studies?

| Negative | Neutral | Positive |
| --- | --- | --- |
| – studying at home – these are not the right conditions, too many distracting stimuli, concentration difficulties<br>– I have no friends in my year<br>– the closure of libraries has an impact on the writing speed of the thesis<br>– it is harder to get good grades, I have to study more<br>– I am constantly tired, I sit in front of the computer for a long time – work plus studies<br>– I am more lazy, I get up at the last minute, I fall asleep during classes | – rather, nothing has changed<br>– it turned out that studying is very similar at home and at the university<br>– I am still as committed to getting higher education as I did before the pandemic | – the pandemic made my studies easier for me mainly due to the lack of commuting to the university, saving time and money<br>– better attendance<br>– studying online encourages me to develop further and undertake other forms of training<br>– I have more time for myself |

Source: Author's own study.

Table 2. Dominant examples of answers to the question: How did the COVID-19 pandemic affect you, what changes do you notice?

| Negative | Neutral | Positive |
| --- | --- | --- |
| – an increase in the general feeling of anxiety, insecurity, and irritability<br>– lack of new experiences and regular contacts with people<br>– focus on the here and now and not on the future<br>– significant limitation of physical activity, extra pounds and dissatisfaction with your appearance | – consolidating the belief that nothing is certain and permanent<br>– the pandemic has exacerbated some issues on which I wonder<br>– I don't see any changes | – better organization of activities during the day, better coordination<br>– a more reflective approach to life, looking for answers to various existential questions<br>– more time for self-development<br>– respect for one's situation, joy in the fact that there is an opportunity to study and work |

Source: Author's own study.

85% of respondents (93 people) agreed with the statement that social isolation was the greatest inconvenience during the COVID-19 pandemic. As can be seen by analyzing the most frequently given answers to the open question about the consequences of this period, they are all derived from this key difficulty that the respondents pointed out. Modern man lives in a complex, dynamically changing reality, he is accompanied by intense emotions, as well as a huge amount of different information and media reports. The teacher's ability to analyze and understand emotional states is particularly important in this reality, due to the fact that he or she will be passing on these skills to his or her charges and supporting them in carrying out developmental tasks leading to emotional maturity.

The respondents were also asked if they developed any new skills during the COVID-19 pandemic and if so, which ones. An affirmative response was given by 31% of the respondents. The following three types of responses were prevalent among student statements on this topic:

1) computer-related skills, programs and applications used for learning e.g. MS Teams,
2) development of organizational skills, effective use of time,
3) development of hobbies, e.g. cooking, painting.

Additionally, 68 respondents (62%) indicated what new activities they would pursue after the pandemic ended. Among the responses, the following categories can be identified: taking care of health and wellness, cultivating interests, and conscious use of electronic media for work, study, and entertainment.

The respondents also answered five questions related to the quality of studying during the COVID-19 pandemic and the quality and content of their contacts with academic staff. 71% of respondents confirmed that they were able to contact teachers online whenever they felt the need to do so. In contrast, less than 40% of the respondents emphasized that they were able to talk about what was going on around them and share their thoughts with their lecturers. Ninety-one people (83% of the respondents) indicated that whenever there was a problem regarding the class, they could always count on help from the staff.


## SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

A total of 110 undergraduate pedagogy students preparing to work in schools with students in the early stages of their development participated in the study, which represented approximately 30% of all students in the field. The purpose of the study was defined as learning about the respondents' experiences of studying during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study was a pilot study. The homogeneity of the study group did not provide in-depth statistical analyses.

The obtained results clearly indicate that in the opinion of the respondents, remote education brings many opportunities and facilitations, on the one hand, but, at the same time, causes many difficulties, both for instructors and students. This is confirmed by reports of other similar studies (e.g. Romaniuk, Łukasiewicz--Wieleba, 2020; Winiarczyk, Warzocha, 2021; Madalińska-Michalak, 2020). The vast majority of respondents qualify their knowledge of the COVID-19 pandemic as very good and sufficient to understand the surrounding reality. This knowledge also, according to the respondents, provides a solid basis to plan specific actions. Noteworthy is the fact that future educators easily identify their emotions and difficulties that were associated with remote learning and work. This is an important factor for success in education, especially for children in the early stages of their development, where the process of socialization of emotions and acquiring their rules takes place. Moreover, assuming the key role of the teacher in the process of supporting the psychosocial development of the child, emotional openness – becomes an important factor of pedagogical success. An important issue is the ability of the study participants to seek support, in accordance with the commonly accepted thesis that if you want to help others, you must first help yourself. Based on the respondents' statements, it can be concluded that the academic staff was not a clear point on the map of this support. The issue that requires further analysis is the search for the reasons for this state of affairs. Wanting to prepare students to work with a child, it is very important to shape the ability to build stable, trust-based interpersonal relationships with their pupils. The analysis of the obtained data also confirms that the respondents are ready to work on themselves and see such a need. They use their pandemic experiences to restructure their beliefs about themselves, others, and the surrounding reality. In addition, they appreciate the sources of support they have, in the form of loved ones, acquaintances and friends. This is a very good starting point for strengthening the habit of working on oneself, as well as analyzing one's personal and professional experiences, without which there is no possibility of continuous development and care for psychological well-being. Questions about the meaning of what is happening around us and where we are going, from being rhetorical become fundamental, without which it will be increasingly difficult to manage our lives and build a stable system of values.

For educators, studying to work with children in the early stages of their development is a time of intensive acquisition of specialized knowledge and the formation of specific social skills. It is also a key stage for students' self-development, building strengths and defining themselves in a new professional role. It is important that the curricula of pedagogical studies include classes that develop these skills, teach critical analysis of experiences as well as the evaluation and design of educational work.

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