

Ferenc Rakoczi II Transcarpathian
Hungarian College of Higher Education

Challenges and Effects of Crisis Situations on Education

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SELECTED
PAPERS

Berehove,
30-31 March 2023

International Academic Conference

ВИКЛИКИ СУЧАСНОЇ ОСВІТИ
ЗУМОВЛЕНІ ЕКСТРЕМАЛЬНИМИ
УМОВАМИ ФУНКЦІОНУВАННЯ

Міжнародна науково-практична конференція
Берегове, 30–31 березня 2023 року

Збірник наукових праць

KRÍZISHELYZETEK
HATÁSA ÉS KIHÍVÁSAI
AZ OKTATÁSBAN

Nemzetközi tudományos konferencia
Beregszász, 2023. március 30–31.

Tanulmánykötet

CHALLENGES AND EFFECTS
OF CRISIS SITUATIONS
ON EDUCATION

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Selected papers

ЗАКАРПАТСЬКИЙ УГОРСЬКИЙ ІНСТИТУТ
ІМЕНІ ФЕРЕНЦА РАКОЦІ ІІ

**ВИКЛИКИ СУЧАСНОЇ ОСВІТИ
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OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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TARTALOM / ЗМІСТ / CONTENT

<i>Empirikus és neveléstörténeti kutatások eredményei / Результати емпіричних та історико-педагогічних досліджень / Results of empirical and educational historical research</i>	19
<i>Boldizsár Boglárka – Cseri Kinga – Sipos Judit: MAGYAR ÉS SZLOVÁK EGYETEMISTÁK TANULÁSI ÉS ÉLETVITELI VÁLTOZÁSAINAK VIZSGÁLATA A VILÁGJÁRVÁNY IDEJÉN</i>	21
<i>Csoóri Zsófia: A KÁRPÁTALJAI TANÍTÓKÉPZÉS SZERVEZÉSI ÉS PEDAGÓGIAI ALAPJAI A CSEHSZLOVÁK KÖZTÁRSASÁG IDEJÉN (1919–1938)</i>	35
<i>Inántsý-Pap, Ágnes – Szilágyi, Barnabás: THE SEARCH FOR GREEK CATHOLIC IDENTITY THROUGH UPBRINGING AND EDUCATION</i>	47
<i>Kinczerová Adriana – Szabó L. Dávid: A PANDÉMIA HATÁSA AZ ERASMUS+ MOBILITÁSOKRA A SELYE JÁNOS EGYETEMEN</i>	55
<i>Molnár, Nikoletta: TEACHER-STUDENT COMMUNICATION CHARACTERISTICS AND THE CRISIS SITUATION</i>	67
<i>Pallay Katalin – Nagy-Füzesséry Bernadett: A II. RÁKÓCZI FERENC KÁRPÁTALJAI MAGYAR FŐISKOLA ÉS AZ UNGVÁRI NEMZETI EGYETEM MAGYAR HALLGATÓI KÖZÖTTI TÁRSAS KAPCSOLATOK ÖSSZEHASONLÍTÁSA ÉS EZEK HATÁSA A KÉT INTÉZMÉNY HALLGATÓINAK EREDMÉNYESSÉGÉRE</i>	77
<i>Szabó L. Dávid – Sýkora Hernády Katalin: A KOMMUNIKÁCIÓS KOMPETENCIA MEGJELENÉSE A SZLOVÁKIAI ÉS A MAGYARORSZÁGI ÁLTALÁNOS ISKOLÁS OLYAN PEDAGÓGIAI DOKUMENTUMOKBAN, AMELYEK A DUALIZMUS KORSZAKÁVAL FOGLALKOZNAK</i>	101
<i>Szalay Ignác: A MÁSODIK VILÁGHÁBORÚ ELŐTTI MAGYAR KÖZÉPISKOLAI TÖRTÉNELEMKÖNYVEK ILLUSZTRÁCIÓI</i>	111
<i>Varga, Aranka: VULNERABLE GROUPS IN CRISIS SITUATIONS: HOW TO SUPPORT ROMA STUDENTS' COPING STRATEGIES</i>	119
<i>Vincze Tamás András: MAGYAR ARISZTOKRATA HÖLGYEK PEDAGÓGIAI TEVÉKENYSÉGE A XX. SZÁZAD ELSŐ FELÉBEN</i>	129

<i>Oktatásszervezési és távoktatási tapasztalatok / Досвід організації освітнього процесу та дистанційного навчання / Educational management and distance learning experiences</i>	137
<i>Andl, Helga – Laki, Tamásné: "WE ARE IN THIS TOGETHER" – DISTANCE LEARNING EXPERIENCE IN SMALL SCHOOLS IN A PANDEMIC IN SPRING 2021</i>	139
<i>Андрусик Павло: ВИКОРИСТАННЯ СУЧАСНИХ ЦИФРОВИХ ОСВІТНІХ РЕСУРСІВ У ЗАКЛАДАХ ВИЩОЇ ОСВІТИ</i>	151
<i>Bernhardt, Renáta: SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS' VIEWS ON DIGITAL EDUCATION IN RELATION TO ON-LINE OPPORTUNITIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION</i>	157
<i>Чичук Антоніна – Кучай Олександр – Гуттерер Єва – Візавер Вікторія: НЕОБХІДНІСТЬ ЗАСТОСУВАННЯ ДИСТАНЦІЙНОГО НАВЧАННЯ В УКРАЇНІ В УМОВАХ ПАНДЕМІЇ І ВОЄННОГО СТАНУ</i>	167
<i>Dezső, Renáta Anna: "ALL'S WELL THE END'S WELL"? CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNT OF AN INTERNATIONAL PEDAGOGY BACHELOR PROGRAM INTRODUCED IN THE MIDDLE OF THE COVID 19 PANDEMIC</i>	173
<i>Dudás János – Holovács József: ONLINE INFORMÁCIÓS RENDSZER KÉSZÍTÉSE AZ OKTATÁSI FOLYAMATOK ADMINISZTRÁLÁSÁRA A II. RÁKÓCZI FERENC KÁRPÁTALJAI MAGYAR FŐISKOLA RÉSZÉRE</i>	183
<i>Furcsa, Laura: PERCEIVED BENEFITS OF ONLINE ORAL EXAMINATIONS AT UNIVERSITIES</i>	191
<i>Fábián Márta – Bárány Erzsébet – Lechner Ilona – Huszti Ilona: A RÁKÓCZI-FŐISKOLA HALLGATÓINAK ATTITÚDJE A (NYELV)TANULÁSHOZ A TÁVOKTATÁS SORÁN</i>	199
<i>Kecskés Judit: KIHÍVÁSOK ÉS LEHETŐSÉGEK A MAGYAR ALAPSZAKOS KÖZÖS KÉPZÉS FINNUGOR NÉPEK ÉS NYELVEK C. TÁRGYÁNAK OKTATÁSÁBAN</i>	215
<i>Magyar, Ágnes: HOW HAVE SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS EXPERIENCED DIGITAL WORK SCHEDULES?</i>	225
<i>Prescott-Pickup, Francis J: DISTANCE LEARNING DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: THE EXPERIENCE OF STUDENTS IN A LARGE HUNGARIAN UNIVERSITY</i>	235
<i>Прядко Олександр: ОРГАНІЗАЦІЯ САМОСТІЙНОЇ РОБОТИ СТУДЕНТІВ ЗА ДОПОМОГОЮ ДИСТАНЦІЙНОГО НАВЧАННЯ</i>	247

<i>Oktatástechnológiai innovációk / Інноваційні технології в сучасному освітньому просторі / Innovative educational technologies</i>	251
<i>Árva, Valéria – Márkus, Éva – Trentinné Benkő, Éva: APPLICATION OF EARLY LANGUAGE TEACHING METHODOLOGY IN DIGITAL EDUCATION. A RESEARCH PROJECT BY THE HUNGARIAN ACADEMY OF SCIENCES AND THE FACULTY OF PRIMARY AND PRESCHOOL EDUCATION, EÖTVÖS LORÁND UNIVERSITY</i>	253
<i>Baksa Adrien – Sztojka Mirosláv: A PROBLÉMAMEGOLDÓ GONDOLKODÁS TANÍTÁSA-TANULÁSA MATEMATIKA-ÓRÁN</i>	267
<i>Csucska Petra – Csopák Éva: AZ OLVASÁS IRÁNTI ATTITŰD VIZSGÁLATA AZ ESZENYI BÁZISISKOLA ALSÓ TAGOZATOS TANULÓINAK KÖRÉBEN</i>	275
<i>Jaskóné Gácsi, Mária: GAMIFICATION – TESTS OF STRENGTH IN THE DIGITAL SPACE FROM AN EDUCATOR'S PERSPECTIVE</i>	283
<i>Gonda, Zsuzsa: THE FEATURES OF TEACHING METHODS IN ONLINE HUNGARIAN LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE LESSONS DURING PANDEMIC</i>	295
<i>Гікоб Андрія: РОЗВИТОК ТВОРЧИХ ЗДІБНОСТЕЙ ДІТЕЙ ДОШКІЛЬНОГО ВІКУ ЗАСОБАМИ ТЕАТРАЛЬНОЇ ПЕДАГОГІКИ</i>	307
<i>Molnár, Ákos – Prisztočka, Gyöngyvér: THE POSSIBILITY OF A NEW TREND IN THE TEACHING OF PHYSICAL EDUCATION IN SCHOOLS</i>	313
<i>Nagy Béla: A GENETIKA ONLINE OKTATÁSÁNAK SAJÁTOS-SÁGAI</i>	327
<i>Nagy-Kolozsvári, Enikő – Fábrián, Márta – Huszti, Ilona: USING GAMES IN THE YOUNG LEARNER ENGLISH CLASSROOM IN TRANSCARPATHIA</i>	333
<i>Papp, Beáta: HUNGARIAN-ITALIAN BILINGUAL EDUCATION IN THE LIGHT OF PUBLIC EDUCATION POLICY</i>	343
<i>Papp Gabriella: ONLINE FELÜLETEK ÖSSZEHASONLÍTÁSA OKTATÁSSZERVEZÉS ÉS E-TEST SZERKESZTÉSE CÉLJÁBÓL</i>	351
<i>Tadeyeva Maria – Tadeyev Petro – Pávlovics Judit: INNOVÁCIÓS TECH- NOLÓGIÁK FEJLŐDÉSE A TEHETSÉGGONDOZÁSBAN</i>	359

<i>Szabó L. Dávid: A KOMMUNIKÁCIÓS KOMPETENCIA DIGITÁLIS FELADATOKKAL VALÓ FEJLESZTÉSI LEHETŐSÉGEI AZ ÁLTALÁNOS ISKOLA 7. ÉVFOLYAMÁN A DUALIZMUS KORSZAKÁNAK TANÍTÁSÁKOR</i>	367
<i>Az ukrainai oktatás helyzete a pandémia és a háborús körülmények között / Стан освіти в Україні в умовах пандемії та війни / The educational situation in Ukraine during the pandemic and war</i>	379
<i>Борисюнок Максим: ПСИХОЛОГО-ПЕДАГОГІЧНІ УМОВИ ВИКОРИСТАННЯ ЦИФРОВИХ ОСВІТНІХ ТЕХНОЛОГІЙ В ЗАКЛАДІ ФАХОВОЇ ПЕРЕДВИЩОЇ ОСВІТИ У ПРОЦЕСІ ПІДГОТОВКИ МАЙБУТНІХ УЧИТЕЛІВ ПОЧАТКОВОЇ ШКОЛИ ДО ПРОФЕСІЙНОЇ ДІЯЛЬНОСТІ</i>	381
<i>Васютіна Тетяна: ОСОБЛИВОСТІ ОРГАНІЗАЦІЇ НАУКОВО-ДОСЛІДНИЦЬКОЇ ДІЯЛЬНОСТІ СТУДЕНТІВ СПЕЦІАЛЬНОСТІ 013 «ПОЧАТКОВА ОСВІТА»</i>	387
<i>Височан Леся: ОСОБЛИВОСТІ ВИКЛАДАННЯ ІНТЕГРОВАНОГО КУРСУ “Я ДОСЛІДЖУЮ СВІТ” У ПОЧАТКОВІЙ ШКОЛІ</i>	395
<i>Джандя Галина: ВИКОРИСТАННЯ ІНТЕРАКТИВНИХ ТЕХНОЛОГІЙ НАВЧАННЯ У ПІДГОТОВЦІ МАЙБУТНІХ УЧИТЕЛІВ ПОЧАТКОВОЇ ШКОЛИ</i>	401
<i>Дзямко Вікторія – Дзямко Віталій: ТРАНСФОРМАЦІЯ ІННОВАЦІЙНИХ ТЕХНОЛОГІЙ В ЗАКЛАДАХ ВИЩОЇ ОСВІТИ В ПЕРІОД ЗДІЙСНЕННЯ ОСВІТНЬОЇ ДІЯЛЬНОСТІ В УМОВАХ ВІЙСЬКОВОГО СТАНУ</i>	405
<i>Золотаренко Тетяна: ДОСВІД ФАХОВОЇ ПІДГОТОВКИ МАЙБУТНІХ УЧИТЕЛІВ ПОЧАТКОВОЇ ШКОЛИ У НОРВЕГІЇ</i>	411
<i>Кіт Галина: НАУКОВІ ДОСЛІДЖЕННЯ МАЙБУТНІХ ПЕДАГОГІВ: ОРІЄНТАЦІЯ НА ПОШУКОВО-ДОСЛІДНИЦЬКУ ДІЯЛЬНІСТЬ МОЛОДШИХ ШКОЛЯРІВ</i>	417
<i>Коломісць Дмитро – Івашкевич Євген – Тертична Таїсія: РОЗВИТОК ЕМОЦІЙНОЇ КУЛЬТУРИ ПЕДАГОГІВ ПІД ЧАС ВОЄННОГО СТАНУ</i>	425
<i>Лазаренко Наталія – Коломісць Алла – Жовнич Олеся: МОДЕРНІЗАЦІЯ ЗМІСТУ ПЕДАГОГІЧНОЇ ОСВІТИ В УМОВАХ НАДЗВИЧАЙНИХ СИТУАЦІЙ</i>	431
<i>Орос Ільдико – Біда Олена – Кучай Тетяна: ОСВІТА В ЕКСТРЕМАЛЬНИХ УМОВАХ: АНАЛІЗ ПРОБЛЕМ І НАСЛІДКІВ ПАНДЕМІЇ В УМОВАХ ВОЄННОГО СТАНУ</i>	435

<i>Осердчук Ольга</i> : ОРГАНІЗАЦІЯ ПАРТНЕРСТВА ВИКЛАДАЧІВ І СТУДЕНТІВ У ВИЩІЙ ОСВІТІ З МЕТОЮ ЯКІСНОГО МОНІТОРИНГУ	443
<i>Силадій Іван – Маринець Надія</i> : ПІДВИЩЕННЯ ПРОФЕСІЙНОЇ МАЙСТЕРНОСТІ ВИКЛАДАЧІВ ГЛОБАЛЬНОГО ВИМІРУ ДЕМОКРАТИЗАЦІЇ ОСВІТИ.....	449
<i>Хижняк Інна</i> : ПРОБЛЕМАТИКА НАУКОВИХ ПЕДАГОГІЧНИХ ДОСЛІДЖЕНЬ У СУЧАСНИХ УМОВАХ ФУНКЦІОНУВАННЯ ОСВІТНЬОЇ СИСТЕМИ УКРАЇНИ.....	455
<i>Чопак Єва</i> : МОВЛЕННЄВА КОМПЕТЕНТНІСТЬ В ПОЛІКУЛЬТУРНОМУ СЕРЕДОВИЩІ.....	463
<i>Шука Галина</i> : ОСНОВНІ ПРИНЦИПИ ОРГАНІЗАЦІЇ ВИКЛАДАННЯ ДИСЦИПЛІН ЗА ВИБОРОМ.....	469
<i>Inklúzió – lelki egészség – egészség tudatosság – perspektívák / Інклюзія – психічне здоров'я – усвідомлене ставлення до здоров'я – перспективи / Inclusion – mental health – health awareness – perspectives.....</i>	477
<i>Атроценко Тетяна</i> : ФОРМУВАННЯ ГОТОВНОСТІ КЕРІВНИКІВ ЗАКЛАДІВ ЗАГАЛЬНОЇ СЕРЕДНЬОЇ ОСВІТИ ДО ВПРОВАДЖЕННЯ ІНКЛЮЗИВНОЇ ОСВІТИ: ТЕОРЕТИЧНІ АСПЕКТИ	479
<i>Berghauer-Olasz Emőke</i> : MENTÁLHIGIÉNÉS TÁMOGATÓ CSOPORT LEHETŐSÉGEI A FELSŐOKTATÁSBAN.....	485
<i>Biró Brigitta</i> : RAJZFEJLŐDÉSI SAJÁTOSÁGOK ÓVODÁS- ÉS KISISKOLÁSKORBAN	497
<i>Bús Ágnes – Bús Éva – Kovács-Bogya Tünde – Szántainé Baráth Anita</i> : SZEREPKONFLIKTUSOK A FELSŐOKTATÁSBAN A PANDEμία IDEJÉN	507
<i>Ceglédi Tímea – Fekete Dorottya – Pusztai Gabriella</i> : ÉRTÉKEK A REZILIENS PEDAGÓGUSOK ÉLETÚTJAIBAN.....	517
<i>Csebil Anikó</i> : TESTI ÉS LELKI EGÉSZSÉG, SPORTOLÁSI SZOKÁSOK A FŐISKOLAI CAMPUSON A PANDEμία IDŐSZAKÁBAN.....	523
<i>Erdei, Róbert</i> : A PROGRAMME TO FOSTER RESILIENCE AMONG KINDERGARTEN CHILDREN.....	531
<i>Гребя Ілдіко – Шелельо Тетяна – Гаврилюк Ілона</i> : БУЛІНГ В ОСВІТНЬОМУ СЕРЕДОВИЩІ ТА ВПЛИВ РІЗНИХ ФАКТОРІВ НА ЙОГО РОЗВИТОК	539

<i>Hanák Zsuzsanna: ÁLLAPOT- ÉS VONÁSSZORONGÁS VIZSGÁLATA EGYETEMI HALLGATÓK KÖRÉBEN.....</i>	545
<i>Kiss Magdaléna: TANÁRI ATTITŰD A VAKOK OKTATÁSÁBAN.....</i>	553
<i>Kondé Zoltán – Kovács Judit: A COVID-TAPASZTALATOK ÖSSZEFÜGGÉSE A COVIDDAL KAPCSOLATOS IMPLICIT BEÁLLÍTÓDÁSOKKAL.....</i>	561
<i>Kós Nóra: KRÍZISHELYZETBEN ADÓDÓ TRAUMA TERÁPIÁJA.....</i>	571
<i>Lestyán Erzsébet: KRÍZISHELYZETEK MEGOLDÁSA PEDAGÓGIAI MÓDSZEREKKEL</i>	579
<i>Михайлович Кристина: ТЕНДЕНЦІЇ РОЗВИТКУ ІНКЛЮЗИВНОЇ ОСВІТИ В ПОЧАТКОВІЙ ШКОЛІ УГОРЩИНИ.....</i>	587
<i>Пісняк Валентина: ІНКЛЮЗІЯ ПІД ЧАС ВІЙНИ: ЯК ПІДТРИМАТИ ДІТЕЙ З ОСОБЛИВИМИ ОСВІТНИМИ ПОТРЕБАМИ</i>	593
<i>Sándor Zita: COVID–19-JÁRVÁNY MEGÉLÉSE ÉS BIOPSZICHOSZOCIÁLIS HATÁSA EGYETEMI HALLGATÓK KÖRÉBEN</i>	599
<i>Simon Gabriella: AZ ONLINE OKTATÁS HATÁSAI A PANDÉMIA ALATT, LEHETŐSÉGEINK.....</i>	615
<i>Sütő Éva: TÁPLÁLKOZÁSI SZOKÁSOKAT BEFOLYÁSOLÓ TÉNYEZŐK KISISKOLÁSKORBAN A PANDÉMIA IDEJE ALATT.....</i>	625
<i>Sýkora Hernády Katalin – Horváth Kinga – Pribéek László – Szabó L. Dávid: A TÁVOKTATÁS HATÁSA A TANÁRI ÉNHATÉKONYSÁGRA</i>	635

“WE ARE IN THIS TOGETHER” – DISTANCE LEARNING EXPERIENCE IN SMALL SCHOOLS IN A PANDEMIC IN SPRING 2021

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Introduction

In the past, some research summaries on the educational situation of small villages and small schools have been produced both in the international literature, such as those by Harrison and Busher (1995) and Fickermann et al (1998), and in Hungarian publications, such as those by Forray (1998, 2009), Imre (2009), Jankó (2011) and Andl (2020). Also, the digital curriculum introduced during the COVID19 epidemic, the implementation of online education, and the consequences of the transition or some aspects of the transition have been the subject of several studies in Hungary¹. Some of these studies emphasised aspects of equity (Hermann 2020; Kende et al. 2021), showing that the disadvantaged situation of the municipality and the high proportion of disadvantaged pupils (HH) and pupils with special educational needs (SNI) made it more difficult to reach pupils, and that the existing disadvantages of pupils were exacerbated. However, to our knowledge, the impact of the digital switchover process in small schools has not yet been studied on a national or international level. Our research, conducted in spring 2021 – when primary schools switched back to distance learning – aimed to explore the implementation of distance education methods in small schools in Baranya county with only lower (primary) grades based on interviews conducted with the heads of the researched institutions.²

¹ For example, Molnár et al. analysed the impact of distance education on the knowledge and skills of students in grades 2-8 (Molnár et al. 2021), and N. Kollár examined the experience from the perspective of teachers (N. Kollár 2021).

² An extended version of the study was published in Hungarian in Andl Helga, Laki Tamásné (2022): *Kisiskolák és a távolléti oktatás [Small schools and distance education]*. In: Kéri, K., Borbélyová, D. & Gubo, Š. (eds): 13th International Conference of J. Selye University. Sections of Pedagogy and Informatics. Komárno, Slovakia, J. Selye University. pp. 9-25. <https://doi.org/10.36007/4133.2022.09>

Statistical data on the institutional scope of the survey

In the academic year of the research, there are twelve institutions where only primary education is provided in Baranya county, with upper secondary students having to attend another institution. In these small schools the proportion of SNI pupils is higher than the county average; based on our experience on the field, there are two main reasons for this. On the one hand, the acceptance of SNI pupils may mean stability/increase in the number of pupils for institutions that are threatened with closure in more than one case; on the other hand, parents are also looking for schools with a low number of pupils, hoping that their children will receive more attention in these small institutions. The proportion of disadvantaged (HH) pupils is also slightly above the county average, but contrary to our preliminary assumption, the proportion of pupils with a cumulative disadvantage (HHH) is lower. (Table 1.)

The data show that, although not typical, there are also some schools with no SNI pupils and schools where the proportion of HH and HHH pupils is below the national and county averages – a rather mixed picture for the institutions studied. While on average it is true that the municipalities in which the schools are located are disadvantaged in some respects, and in many cases the institutions are largely disadvantaged, this is not the case for all institutions.

Table 1. Number of primary school places in Baranya county, October 2020 (own edit)

	Number of schools	Number of pupils (persons)	Proportion of SNI pupils (%)	Portion of HH pupils (%)	Portion of HHH pupils (%)	Portion of HH and HHH pupils (%)
Total number of primary schools	138	25.750	9,23%	8,27%	8,42%	16,70%
Primary schools with primary education only	12	320	11,87%	9,37%	4,68%	14,06%

Sources: KIR-STAT, Oktatási Hivatal, https://dari.oktatas.hu/kozserdeku_index [2021.04.16.]

Small schools and distance learning

Aims, questions and methods of the research

The aim of our research was to explore the implementation of distance (digital) education in small schools in Baranya county during the COVID-19 epidemic in the spring of 2021 based on the experiences and opinions of the heads of institutions.

The main research questions were:

-What is special about small schools with only a primary education in terms of distance (digital) education?

-How are the institutions responding to the new challenges?

-What strategies do they use to reach students and ensure effective teaching? How is equity, especially support for disadvantaged pupils and pupils with special educational needs, ensured?

In our study, we reached ten schools out of twelve schools in Baranya county with only primary education. The research was conducted during the online education period from 8 March to 19 April 2021. The interview method was chosen to explore the experiences of the heads of the institutions: semi-structured interviews were conducted online with the heads of ten small schools – member schools or sites – during the first half of April 2021. For the interviewees, being in it meant both a high degree of subjectivity and a more unreflective narrative, which, as we anticipated, could bring them closer to the reality they experienced; thus, the ‘there and then’ strategy allowed the interviewees to develop a less ‘combed through’ or ordered position in their narratives.³

Results of the research

Some characteristics of the schools in the survey

Among the ten schools surveyed, there are nine schools operating in rural areas and one in an urban area. Most of the schools are state-run, one of them is run by a religious institution. The smallest school has only 8 pupils, but there are also schools with 69 pupils. All of these schools accept pupils from other municipalities, while not all local pupils attend the local school. One of the characteristics of small schools is that they teach in an undifferentiated or semi-differentiated way: eight of the schools surveyed had groups of pupils, although for the main subjects they usually use ‘group splitting’, i.e., they are taught by year groups. Nationality education is also a feature of small schools – it is often one of the schooling strategies (see Andl 2015) –, therefore, in Baranya county, which has a high nationality ratio, it is not surprising that seven of the schools surveyed are German nationality schools.

³ The interviews quoted in the study are followed by a letter of the alphabet in brackets to indicate the school, in order to protect anonymity.

Digital education at school – digital timetable, online lessons

There is a wide variation between schools in the implementation of digital education. The most fascinating element of the implementation process is the emphasis that this group of institutions has placed on the digital curriculum – which all schools have created – and held actual online lessons: only one school is an exception, with nine schools having lessons every day of the working week. Regular lessons were important for schools not only to keep up with the curriculum, but also to maintain pupil's regular schedules.

All the schools used the KRÉTA platform, but they did not necessarily use DKT [DCS] (Digital Collaboration Space) for their online lessons; two schools used Zoom, one used Skype, one used Facebook Messenger and one used Jitsi, i.e., mostly those that had worked well in the previous distance learning period. We also met schools that have their own web interface.

The clustered or semi-clustered groups of students that were typical in face-to-face teaching scenarios have almost disappeared in online teaching: all but two schools preferred a grade-by-grade breakdown, as it was considered impossible or difficult to co-present different grades in the online space, at least for the 'core subjects'.

The timetable and the breakdown by year group did not allow for all lessons in all subjects, but all schools insisted on keeping the 'core subjects' (Hungarian language and literature, mathematics), and German lessons were also held in the schools with national minority education. In addition, different subjects per school were included in the online timetable: environmental studies, English, religion, technology, and singing were also taught online. Some of these were optional: one of our interviewees (School I) simply told pupils, "if you feel like singing or talking, come". And one school systematically combined group and individual lessons: group lessons usually involved 2-5 pupils and individual lessons were usually with a single pupil.

One of the biggest challenges was accountability, with three schools reporting difficulties in this respect. All schools required students to produce returnable/uploadable assignments (possibly in the form of a video), but there were also examples of scanned quizzes and online essays.

The digital competences of the teachers

In their study on barriers to teaching mentioned that among teachers, Szabó et al. claim that teachers in the lower grades were the least prepared to implement online education, due to the lower level of digital tools and programmes in their classroom practice (Szabó et al. 2021). In our research we

found that schools have made great efforts to develop teacher competences. The digital competences of teachers vary widely, but it can be concluded from the narratives of the interviewees that significant changes have taken place in a year. Teachers have mostly increased their knowledge through self-organised ‘training’: in some cases the IT teacher gave a quick in-house training session the weekend before the switchover, in others, the wife of the head of the institution, also a teacher, helped teachers:

“My colleagues came to my our flat so they could learn it. My wife taught my two colleagues and her colleagues how to use it. They were there until 8 o’clock at night.” (School H)

Despite initial difficulties and fears, the knowledge and use of digital platforms and programmes became commonplace, with the vast majority of teachers showing a willingness to innovate.

Equipment at home, use of equipment

Hermann’s analysis based on data from the 2017 National Competency Survey and published in April 2020, following the introduction of distance learning, showed that around a fifth of primary school pupils had either no or limited access to online education (Hermann 2020). This was confirmed by the Osváth’s study which found that nearly a third of students were unable to participate in digital education or were not able to participate adequately due to a lack of equipment (Osváth 2020). The schools in our study were also strongly affected by this problem, although the experience of the individual institutions varied. Due to the situation of the municipality and the differences in pupil composition, we found a wide variation in the (digital) device provision of families/students: ‘all families have more devices’ and ‘some devices’ are the two extremes of the scale. Where there was a large shortage of devices, schools were making an effort to ensure that students did not fall behind completely in their learning. The most typical solution – and one that has attracted the attention of schools that do not offer online classes – is laptop or tablet rental, which meant that even teachers’ laptops were distributed.

Even if they have the tools to learn online at home, there can be additional problems, with many families not having a **room or desk** for their children:

“It is a terribly poor family, and last year I could hear my colleague crystal clear as she was giving a maths lesson, but I couldn’t hear the little kid, so I addressed the mum (...), I said: can’t you move the kid to another room (...) but the mum said they didn’t have another room (...) And then she put the kid in the kitchen. They did everything they could.” (School A)

A bigger problem was that, although a governmental decree made internet access free during the digital working hours, the most disadvantaged families could not benefit from this, as the discount was only available on subscription.

‘If they have the money, they’ll upload to the system again. When it runs out, we switch to postal. If the parents have the money, they upload again. It’s quite eclectic. We’re flexible so that the child, who comes first, doesn’t get damaged in it.’ (School H)

In response to the shortage of equipment and internet, three schools have enabled the use of computers in school when needed:

‘I hold a reception in the mornings. One by one, two by two, they come in and use the school computers. I have everything from cameras to microphones and can help with homework. I’m there all morning and often in the afternoon as well (...) It is a family atmosphere, and it is totally informal.’ (School H)

As much as the schools tried to provide equipment, there were times when they had to send the assignments by post. In addition, the lack of other tools – such as paper, scissors, and glue – also made learning difficult, especially for pupils in primary education who had to do a wide range of manual tasks at school. For children from families with a more disadvantaged socio-economic status, it was of particular importance for schools to find alternative solutions, and several good practices were identified:

‘I was happy to find out on Thursday [about next week’s changeover], and I spent most of Friday photocopying for them. (...) I stayed up all Thursday night preparing for arts and crafts, because these kids don’t have glue, scissors, drawing paper, coloured paper at home, I prepared everything. I even wrote on the drawing paper that this was going to be the bunny drawing. I gave them a spatula; I gave them cut out coloured paper. Some of them even returned a beautiful piece of work.’ (School A)

Keeping in touch with families

Interviewees reported that while during the digital switchover in 2020 it was more difficult to contact families; in three of the surveyed schools, interviewees were unable to communicate with some children and their parents. In the school year of our research, there were no such problems: **there were no unreachable children in the schools surveyed.** In four schools, contact hours were offered in addition to online lessons to ensure that children could be involved in some way in their education.

In order to help families, childcare was also provided by the schools, with parents in five institutions using it on a permanent or temporary basis. Overall, however, few families asked for childcare, one of the reasons being

that some parents were unemployed. In addition, childcare was a problem for the few staff in the school: if the teacher was teaching a lesson for others, childcare had to be organised separately for the children in the school.

Support for schools; networking

Katalin R. Forray defines the relationship between the village school and the local society in the following way: *“Local schools are important factors in the development of rural areas and in preventing cultural depopulation. The close, emotional attachment of the population to the local small schools, which can be expressed in the form of financial or physical sacrifices for the institutions, is a valuable element in the cohesion and survival of the community (...) While it is true that each school is part of the local society, the small school is, if one can put it this way, an even more important part of the social environment.”* (Forray 2009, 254 p.)

Bearing in mind the previous quote, our study attempted to tackle the strong embeddedness of the small schools in the local community and their close links with other services in the municipality which were evident during the epidemic. Although the municipalities no longer run the schools, several forms of support were present during the period under study. On the one hand, the role of the village guardianship service, which took on the role of ‘mailing’ paper-based tasks, can be highlighted:

“And for the children in... the village caretaker comes every day for lunch, and he also does the postman’s job, so he does it for us, (...) he brings it to them and brings it back if we ask for something back. This is not new, it was like this before COVID.” (School A)

As mentioned above, the majority of the schools are German national schools, so it is not surprising that support has also come from the **national minority municipalities**. In addition to the municipalities, the schools could count on the support of the **family and child welfare services**, especially in engaging hard-to-reach children in the learning process, and one interviewee highlighted the role of the school social worker.

According to a questionnaire survey of teachers conducted by N. Kollár (2021), the help of a specialist with IT skills was the most lacking among teachers. However, in the schools featured in this study, we found the opposite was true: the majority of schools received significant support from an IT teacher or a **colleague** with IT expertise. (N. Kollár 2021) The **maintainer** was only mentioned by interviewees in connection with the digital timetable or the lending of equipment, and they did not ask for professional help, which was mostly justified by their perennial peripheral situation, as one of them put it:

“I’m quite self-driven because my experience is that help always came later.” (School G)

Those whom schools could really count on to help were the **parents** – and here we should not just think of the exceptional case of an IT parent creating a web interface for the school, but of the evidence of cooperation that teachers have repeatedly experienced:

“If parents were not so flexible, we would be in big trouble.” (School B)

One example of cooperation was when a teacher asked for parental help in delivering tests:

“One mother just took her daughter out for an evening walk to deliver their next day’s test. And it was written on the envelope that you can only open it on the 25th and only in front of me.” (School I)

Also, an extraordinary donation from a **former student** was reported in one school, although this was during the digital switchover in 2020: a former student and his father lent the school sixty laptops. With this help, all the students had ‘their own’ laptops that they could work on.

What seems to be an untapped potential is cooperation with other primary education schools. This is not only a feature of the epidemic period, but also of the general operation. In our view, professional cooperation, exchange of experience and learning from each other’s good practices could significantly change the situation of the institutions and strengthen their self-image. An example of such an initiative can be seen in Italy, where the Movimento delle Piccole Scuole (Movement of Small Schools) brings together geographically isolated schools and schools with a small number of pupils (Andl 2020)

Further challenges

The gravest challenge our interviewees identified, apart from teaching, was providing **emotional support to children and parents**. On the one hand, families were affected by individual tragedies and losses, and on the other hand, the lack of contact with peers often required virtual meetings and conversations outside the classroom.

“With viral outbreaks come tragedies near and far. The children also feel the effects of disconnection from community and friends. Increasingly, we also have the role of emotional support. Both the children and the parents are tired.” (School J)

Many students were home alone, so it was particularly important that teachers kept in touch with students:

“20% are home alone, third or fourth graders. First-graders and second graders are not left home alone. They [the parents] then negotiate with their bosses, telecommute or other things. But here, parents usually do physical work, and you can’t do that from home. You can’t get off the tractor.” (School H)

Emotional support was also needed because young students were disoriented by changes in their familiar environment and unexpected situations:

“Our children love going to school. They cried when the Prime Minister announced that there will be no school. I’ve never seen anything like it, I’m telling you, I was crying too.” (School H)

Advantages and disadvantages of online education

Although there were significantly more disadvantages of online education, the heads of institutions also listed advantages. The development of **digital competences of teachers and students** was highlighted everywhere, and the development of **independent learning** was mentioned by many. It is worth mentioning the reflection of one of our interviewees that in some respects they have entered a calmer period: the small teaching staff and the low number of students put a lot of pressure on teachers and students in the organisation of different programmes or even in the expected presence at competitions, *“we can pay more attention to what we are supposed to do, we are not the entertainment industry”* (School I).

Sorting out the disadvantages, our interviewees approached the situation from an emotional point of view: they *“miss each other”* (School A). The lack of physical presence in the common space, the **lack of direct contact**, was the most frequent motive:

“Co-vibration is extremely important; it doesn’t come across like that here.” (School J)

In this context, a frequently mentioned disadvantage of online education is that it is less conducive to the development of **social competences**. While progress is being made with the curriculum, there is also **falling behind**, with difficulties in teaching writing being a particular problem. At primary education level, the foundation period is impaired, especially the **development** of fine motor skills, and the teaching of writing is much more difficult. **Assessment** is also difficult, as learning conditions vary widely, and the extent of parental support cannot always be identified. In addition, the **differentiation** that typically operates in small schools is more difficult to achieve in the online classroom.

One of our interviewees pointed out that a great deal of attention had to be paid to first grade pupils, as they were the ones who had not received the usual pre-school preparation the previous year, when they were still in kindergarten, and they had a big gap. Focusing on the disadvantages, the main factors listed were the difficulties for pupils, but the administrative burden on teachers and the increase in the **time taken to prepare for lessons** were also reported by heads of institutions.

The specific situation of small schools in implementing online education

During our research, we found that the institutions studied tried to take advantage of being a small school in online education, which was largely reflected in flexibility and the search for flexible response options:

“I think the same [speciality of the school] as in normal education is flexibility. At least we do it in a way that whoever needs what, we try to provide it. It may not be completely regular, but we can manage. We have children here, if we can read in the afternoon, we read in the afternoon.” (School F)

One head of an institution used the solution of cycling around before class, dropping the tests in the postboxes, and then asking the children to go to the postbox, open the envelope, solve the problem in front of the teacher, put it back in the envelope and take it to the postbox. The teacher then went round again and collected the papers.

The small class and school size also made it possible to take into account the fact that in one school the timetable was set so that siblings' classes were not at the same time if possible. Similarly, in another school, the inclusion of private lessons in addition to group lessons in the timetable proved to be a useful solution. Our experience has been that differentiation and personalisation in this institutional context are transposed from real to virtual spaces.

“The heart of the digital thing is that we're trying to somehow preserve the human side of it.” (School J)

Szilveszter (2021) and his colleagues examined the educational success of children from different socioeconomic families during the Spring 2020 distance education period. Their results showed that socioeconomic status and educational attainment were not so much influencing factors, but rather whether families could successfully adapt to the new situation, provide a calm environment, develop a predictable schedule, and whether students could maintain an appropriate level of motivation. The schools in our study have sought to help families by ensuring that children's school activities follow a fixed timetable, largely in line with the practice of attendance education, with daily online lessons being one of the main aims. Our previous examples have also shown that a variety of tools have been used to support individual learning pathways to maintain and increase student motivation.

Conclusion

The introduction of distance education has been a major challenge for institutions which had to find broad solutions to a wide range of problems – and this is of course also true for small schools with only primary education.

The research shows that the institutions surveyed have been as flexible as possible in adapting to the challenges and have made many efforts to ensure that all students participate in some form of learning. Family background and school attitudes have a significant influence on the possibility of engaging in digital learning, and the schools that were the ‘sites’ of the research have sought to support families through regular contact. Nine out of ten schools have provided daily online lessons and other opportunities to increase the effectiveness of education, with digital tools, platforms and programmes being the most used options.

We have found that, although the disadvantaged location of the municipality and the high proportion of disadvantaged pupils and pupils with special educational needs make it more difficult to reach pupils (cf: Kende et al. 2021), the small number of pupils, the strong embeddedness in the local society, the intensive personal contacts and the differentiation (which is already a daily practice), make it possible to give more opportunities for individual treatment in small schools, and thus, for these opportunities were mostly used, aspects of equity were strongly present in the institutions studied. In other words, while the effectiveness of small schools is often questioned, we have shown through the institutions included in the research that, in the unexpected situation of the pandemic, the characteristics of the small school setting can be interpreted as opportunities that can induce effective solutions.

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