

## **ARTYKUŁY I ROZPRAWY**

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### **TEACHERS WORKING WITH STUDENTS WHO HAVE SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS AND DISABILITIES IN POLAND DURING THE SARS-COV-2 PANDEMIC**

#### **Introduction**

The SARS-CoV-2 virus gradually triggered a pandemic around the world. Every country and every society found itself in quite a difficult, unusual situation, which humanity had never encountered beforehand. The pandemic considerably impacted all aspects of human life: education, work, sport, culture, and social life. It particularly touched the global economy. The research presented here has a theoretical-empirical character, in which we focus on education, the sector most affected by the coronavirus epidemic.

The spreading virus sparked the need for new solutions so that education could generally be carried out and not discontinued. The Ministry of Education and Science decided to close the schools in Poland in late March / early April 2020. This required considering how educating children and teenagers, especially those needing special help, that is, students with SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities), would be continued. The virus increased the incidence of illness throughout Poland, causing concerns for one's life and health. This brought about feelings of lack of safety. It forced the Polish government to move to a remote education system. For teachers, this meant having to learn many methods, techniques and tools to allow distance teaching. Since then, we have had less than two years of experience relating to the different kinds of education through various forms, modes and with the use of

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Milena Miałkowska-Kozaryna (<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7829-4876>); The Maria Grzegorzewska University, Szczęśliwicka 40, 02-353 Warsaw; tel. +48 22 5893600; e-mail: [mmialkowska@aps.edu.pl](mailto:mmialkowska@aps.edu.pl)

diverse technologies. Jacek Pyżalski (2020) remarks that people's knowledge of remote education after the pandemic is vastly different than it was before its outbreak. Before the SARS-CoV-2 virus appeared, remote forms of education had been most often an individual choice. The people who used it were usually students or adults desiring to broaden their qualifications. In Poland, education in schools took many forms during different periods of the pandemic. As a result, terminology related to remote education should be defined at the outset. Remote education, collectively called *e-learning* or *e-education*, is the process of conveying didactic content to students by a teacher using mobile tools and the Internet, without the need for an in-person meeting in a specific place and at a specific time (Tanaś, 2005). Remote lessons can be divided by taking into account the mode of students' participation: synchronous or asynchronous. The synchronous mode is called "the real-time mode" because the teacher and students connect simultaneously using mobile tools and the Internet. It resembles a standard lesson in school, but attendees are in their own homes in front of a computer, albeit free conversation is possible. The advantage of such an educational mode is fast and direct contact with the teacher; however, not everyone enjoys mandatory and simultaneous attendance during classes. The second, asynchronous mode, is the opposite of synchronous teaching and consists of placing the didactic content and materials, including performance tests, on a certain server or sending them via email directly to students. All these processes do not occur in real-time. A great advantage of this method is that participants are free to work at their own pace; however, they may encounter difficulties if they want to contact the teacher directly (Bednarek, 2008). In Poland, during the pandemic, we experienced different forms of remote education. As has already been mentioned, there were periods when all schools were closed by a central decision, and teaching occurred either by teachers sending materials to students or by using e-learning platforms. Thanks to such platforms, teachers could create a virtual classroom, adding students to it via links, sharing educational materials, or running synchronous lessons with students in real-time. The Moodle platform, or applications including Skype and Zoom, were used for a long time. As the pandemic continued, schools gradually gained secure free access to Microsoft 365 Education with MS Teams and G-Suite with Google Classroom. Remote teaching, like any other method of education, has its supporters and opponents. In this book, however, we do not evaluate these options. We acknowledge that children with special educational needs found themselves in a challenging situation because their development requires multi-specialist support from professionals in direct contact. This group of children's situation was worsened by their experience of the crisis. One of the crisis factors was certainly the introduction of remote learning and quarantine in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. These circumstances brought difficulties to all the following aspects of the functioning of children: "namely cognitive – dif-

ferent to the previous mode of education; emotional – anxiety relating to newness and unclearness of the situation; social – contact with peers and teachers limited to the ones online, via social media” (Kluczyńska & Zabłocka-Żytka, 2020, pp. 6–7). According to Pyżalski (2020), as a result, children’s experiences throughout the crisis should be examined and defined in three contexts: social, family and personality traits. The social context concerns the total change in life and the rhythm of a given day, limited freedom (staying at home), and a constant influx of information concerning the pandemic in Poland and worldwide. The family context is connected to the loss of physical contact with extended family members (grandparents, cousins) and the deterioration of family relationships. Furthermore, children’s behaviour indicate if they are mature enough to handle the situation they are facing. Both students and teachers have experienced difficult psychological circumstances caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus. It must be underlined that remote education triggered many changes when switching to the remote teaching system, bringing forth many negative emotions. The most significant challenge resulted from a lack of experience in this area. Distance learning specifically demands from teachers certain competencies in the field of, among other things, IT, pedagogy, leadership, subject expertise, and social skills. IT skills are essential to operate computers and any programs, applications or Internet websites that help teachers run lessons with students and share didactic materials. Generally speaking, pedagogical skills are the ability to work with students in an educational context and as mentors. Also, teachers need leadership skills to properly plan and organise lessons, set different tasks and exercises, and supervise their performance. Subject expertise is teachers’ knowledge and skills in their particular subject. Furthermore, social skills are needed in teacher-student contact and instilling in students skills in building interpersonal relations (Kuźmicz, 2015). During remote lessons, some actions performed by teachers in relation to children in the education process became impossible. Students and teachers were separated from each other, and even if they could see and hear one another through a computer and dedicated tools, even then, the teacher’s actions were limited. As a result, students had to exhibit a high level of activity, self-discipline, independence, and motivation (Lorens, 2011). However, it should be emphasised that due to the prevailing impairments and disabilities, children with special educational needs finally did not have a chance at this because of their limited possibilities in this area. According to Jacek Ścibor (2020), the teacher still plays a key role despite the distance between teachers and students caused by remote education. Not so much in the character of the most important person who is the source of knowledge but as a guide who helps find the way in the digital world, full of information. Teachers determine what materials they give their students and how they share them if they attract children’s interest and create a friendly space conducive to remembering new information and gaining skills.

## Objectives of the study

The main aim of the research carried out in Poland was to learn about the experiences and opinions of teachers working with SEND students in mainstream schools, those with inclusion classrooms and in special schools during the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic. Due to the extensive amount of information obtained in the course of the research, we will only present the part of the findings that specifically answer the following research questions:

- How would teachers describe the individual level of tiredness / annoyance / sadness / stress / commitment / composure / positive attitude / well-being / involvement in helping others / job burnout before and during the pandemic, and do important differences exist in these areas?
- How would teachers evaluate the education of SEND students during the pandemic?
- How would teachers evaluate working with SEND students during remote learning?

## Method

The research was conducted using a quantitative approach. A link to the survey questionnaire was emailed to the institutions whose principals consented to the research. The Google Forms platform was used to conduct the survey. The schools that remained open and agreed to the study being carried out face-to-face received questionnaires in paper form.

## Results and analysis

The research was conducted in Poland at the end of 2020 and the beginning of 2021 with teachers from different types of schools. The vast majority were female ( $N = 233$ ), with a minority of male teachers ( $N = 39$ ).

**Table 1.** Distribution of respondents by gender

	Gender	Frequency ( $N$ )	Percentage
$N = 276$	Male	233	85
	Female	39	14
	(...)	1	1

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on the research carried out.

At the stage of conceptualising the research, we planned to research even amounts of teachers in the respective institutions in Poland that teach students with special educational needs. However, this had to be adjusted to the number

of actual permissions obtained from the respective school types, as shown in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Distribution of respondents by type of institution in which they work

<b>N = 276</b>	<b>Mainstream schools</b>	<b>Schools with inclusion classrooms</b>	<b>Special schools</b>
	N = 115	N = 58	N = 103
	42%	21%	37%

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on the research carried out.

Almost half of the focus group comprised early education teachers; one in three respondents was a subject teacher. In turn, every fifth respondent was a teaching assistant working with a SEND child. The research showed that in mainstream schools, those with inclusion classrooms and in special schools, teachers fulfil various functions simultaneously as early education teachers and subject teachers or combine additional functions. For this reason, the results in the table do not sum up to 100%. It results from extra functions in school, which the respondents declared.

**Table 3.** Distribution of respondents by educational field

	<b>Frequency (N)</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Early education teachers	133	48
Subject teachers	81	29
Teaching assistants	55	20
Pedagogical therapists	19	7
School counsellors / Pastoral officers	11	4
School psychologists	3	1
Therapists	20	7
Other education workers	17	6

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on the research carried out.

Almost half of the focus group comprised early education teachers; one in three respondents was a subject teacher. In turn, every fifth respondent was a teaching assistant working with a SEND child. The research showed that in mainstream schools, those with inclusion classrooms and in special schools, teachers fulfil various functions, being at the same time early education teachers and subject teachers or combining additional functions – because of that, the results in the table do not sum up to 100%. It results from extra functions in school, which the respondents declared. Seniority among teachers was considered as one factor affecting experience (see Table 4).

**Table 4.** Seniority among teachers

Years of experience	Frequency (N)	Percentage
Under one year	15	5
1–5 years	79	29
6–10 years	82	30
11–15 years	44	16
16–20 years	26	9
Above 20 years	29	11
No data	1	0

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on the research carried out.

In designing the research, we wanted to take into account as many disabilities that can appear in a group of students with special educational needs as possible. The research results in this area are presented below (see Table 5). It should be noted that the participating teachers work with children that have more than one disability (multiple disabilities), which the respondents declared in the survey questionnaire. The teachers that took part in the research most often work with children with specific learning difficulties ( $N = 63\%$ ), with an autism spectrum disorder ( $N = 52\%$ ) and with an intellectual disability ( $N = 46\%$ ). The latest research conducted in Poland (Kulesza et al., 2019) shows, first of all, that the number of children with autism is increasing and that more and more students are transferring from special schools to inclusion schools.

**Table 5.** Distribution of specific disabilities among students with whom the respondents work

Type of impairment / difficulty of intrinsic / extrinsic character	Frequency (N)	Percentage
Specific learning difficulties	173	63
Autism spectrum disorder	144	52
Intellectual disability	127	46
Long-term health conditions	73	26
ADHD	71	26
Physical disability	70	25
Environment of neglect	68	25
Hearing impairment	64	23
Cultural differences	64	23
Educational setbacks	62	23
Visual impairments	52	19
Special talents	49	18
Mental disorders (crises, traumas)	39	14

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on the research carried out.

### Teachers in reference to the pandemic – subjective assessment of their own mental health

A vast majority of teachers ( $N = 94\%$ ) said the employees of their school or students or their close family members ( $N = 89\%$ ) had suffered from COVID-19. The incidence of the illness in Poland varied throughout the pandemic, and most mainstream schools remained closed, while special schools were open for most of the pandemic. The research results show that this discrepancy most often coincided with the type of school: mainstream school, a school with inclusion classrooms, special school (see Table 6).

**Table 6.** Remote teaching during the pandemic in Poland

Remote teaching	Type of school	Percentage
	Mainstream schools	85
	Schools with inclusion classrooms	88
	Special schools	51

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on the research carried out.

Literature on this topic suggests that different critical events directly or indirectly affect individuals and change their psycho-emotional functioning (Baltes, Reese & Lipsitt, 1984; Bee, 1994). The SARS-CoV-2 pandemic affected every-

**Table 7.** Psycho-emotional functioning of teachers

Chosen aspects	Before the pandemic, you were...		During the pandemic, you are...		Statistics	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>T</i>	<i>d</i>
Tired	2.97	1.14	3.51	1.36	-5.82**	0.43
Annoyed	2.54	1.10	3.52	1.30	-11.01**	0.81
Sad	3.90	1.76	4.34	1.31	-4.73**	0.28
Stressed	3.95	1.59	3.11	1.48	5.35**	0.55
Committed to work	5.05	0.96	3.47	1.76	14.80**	1.11
Composed	4.54	1.14	4.04	1.28	7.75**	0.41
Positively looking forward to the future	4.26	1.46	3.99	1.41	3.37**	0.19
Unwell (headache, stomach-ache)	3.48	1.69	3.61	1.34	-1.50	0.08
Involved in helping others	4.01	1.33	3.75	1.54	2.36*	0.18
Burnt out by the job	3.45	1.77	3.19	1.66	2.18*	0.15

\*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.001$

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on the research carried out.

one both indirectly and, unfortunately, very often in a direct way. That is why we sought the answer to the question: how would the participating teachers assess their functioning in the chosen aspects of mental health?

The research results reveal that during the pandemic, the respondents assessed themselves as more tired, more often annoyed, often experiencing sadness, less committed to work, and also less composed. The results show that, during the pandemic, the teachers frequently had a less optimistic outlook on the future and were less involved in helping others, which is alarming. The research showed a lack of meaningful statistical differences regarding whether well-being of participants in the area (frequency of pain experienced – headache or stomach-ache) significantly changed during the pandemic. Interestingly, the respondents pointed out that they felt less burnt out by their jobs during the pandemic and were less stressed.

### **Education of children with special educational needs during the pandemic**

Including pupils with SEND in mainstream schools is becoming increasingly popular worldwide (Aksamit & Marcinkowska, 2021). New publications introduce education systems and methods of working with pupils with SEND in different countries (Kulesza, 2013), but no one predicted that teachers would face a new challenge – distance education of pupils with SEND. Our research results show that most teachers ( $N = 94\%$ ) believe the pandemic negatively affects SEND students' educational achievements. According to the respondents ( $N = 90\%$ ), this has a specific, adverse effect on the mental well-being and behaviour of students with special educational needs. Literature in this area suggests that children with different types of special needs, including students with an intellectual disability (those with an autism spectrum disorder, manifest many difficult behaviours, such as hitting, pulling, spitting, verbal aggression, and self-harm, even in a typical school situation) (Dekker & Koot, 2003; Miałkowska-Kozaryna & Aksamit, 2018). When a teacher is with a child, they can react to varying extents; however, they were often stripped of this opportunity during the pandemic, especially during distance learning periods. The SARS-CoV-2 pandemic introduced several restrictions, which teachers also pointed out in the study. In their opinion ( $N = 89$ ), restricted meetings, or lack thereof, negatively affected SEND students' relationships with their peers. Teachers also indicated that remote education deepens the differences in knowledge levels between SEND students and non-disabled students. Educating children with special educational needs is a process in which many individuals cooperate (teachers, professionals, parents, children, etc.) (Aksamit, Chitiyo & Wheeler, 2021). During the pandemic, parents often had to actively participate in remote education (e.g., turning on the computer, explaining instructions, doing exercises together, and printing off materials). As a result, the respondents ( $N = 78\%$ ) pointed out that children's educational



achievements often depended on the amount of work put in by parents. Nearly every fourth participant ( $N = 23\%$ ) had difficulty answering whether students reported concerns about becoming infected or that the illness would infect those close to them. Almost half of the teachers ( $N = 45\%$ ) answered affirmatively to this question, and nearly every third respondent ( $N = 31\%$ ) negatively.

**Table 8.** Teachers' opinions of SEND students during remote education

Results (in %)	I strongly DISAGREE	I somewhat DISAGREE	Hard to say	I somewhat AGREE	I strongly AGREE
The pandemic situation negatively affects the well-being and behaviour of SEND students	0	3	7	34	56
The pandemic situation negatively affects the scholastic achievements of SEND students	1	3	4	31	61
The pandemic situation (due to limited meetings) negatively affects SEND students' relations with their peers	0	4	7	28	61
Remote education positively affects school absences of SEND students	22	11	30	25	12
My students want to bring up the subject of the pandemic in lessons	11	26	19	33	11
My students report worries that they will become ill or that the illness will touch someone close to them	12	19	23	31	15
Remote education deepens the differences in knowledge levels between SEND students and non-disabled students	4	5	7	30	54
The pandemic situation negatively affects my well-being	1	7	15	38	39
When I have a bad day, I can talk about this with the school psychologist / a friend from work	6	18	21	32	23
The educational achievements of SEND students during remote education depend on the amount of individual work put in by their parents	1	6	15	41	37

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on the research carried out.

The respondents were also asked how they would assess working with SEND students while using remote education. This concerned the practical area of teachers' work: the level of preparation needed for remote lessons, the ability to adapt the material, and also the positive or negative aspects of remote education in transferring this to their private life (see Table 9).

**Table 9.** Opportunities, difficulties, and limitations of remote education of SEND children in teachers' opinions

<b>Results (in %)</b>	<b>I strongly DISAGREE</b>	<b>I somewhat DISAGREE</b>	<b>Hard to say</b>	<b>I somewhat AGREE</b>	<b>I strongly AGREE</b>
Running online lessons is stressful for me	8	12	18	34	27
There is a lack of technical support (computers, tablets, Internet access) for teachers who cannot afford to purchase this	4	14	12	30	40
Teachers should be trained in using computer programs used to carry out remote education	0	3	4	26	67
I am afraid that students will record my lessons and upload them to the Internet without my knowledge	17	23	23	22	15
While using remote education, my contact with students' parents increased	11	17	15	35	22
While using methods of remote education, I adapt methods, forms, work tools and materials to the needs and abilities of my students	1	2	12	36	49
Remote education brings only benefits to teachers and students	41	37	13	5	4
Remote education has allowed conveying knowledge in a more interesting way	18	34	22	20	6
Remote work done from home negatively affects my family life	6	15	26	26	27
I believe that I am well prepared to carry out remote education	3	12	38	34	13

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on the research carried out.

The research results are mirrored in the works of other authors in Poland. For example, Barbara Jankowiak and Sylwia Jaskulska (2020) researched teachers' well-being and their attitudes towards remote education during the pandemic. That research aimed to determine teachers' attitude towards remote education during the pandemic in relation to their well-being. A total of 782 teachers from Classes I–III (in Poland correspond to children of approximately 7–9 years of age, respectively). During this phase of primary education, lessons are run mainly by one general teacher, rather than separate teachers, each for individual subjects) and Classes IV–VIII (in Poland correspond to children of approximately 10–14 years of age, respectively). During this phase of primary education, lessons are run by separate teachers, each for individual subjects) of primary schools and teachers from comprehensive secondary

schools, technical secondary schools and vocational schools (comprehensive secondary school in Poland consists of four classes which correspond to children of approximately 15–18 years of age, respectively. Adolescents of these ages can also attend technical secondary school – duration: five years – or vocational school – duration: three years – if they prefer to receive more specialised education), were involved in the research. Most of them had worked in the profession for more than 11 years. The research findings revealed that remote education scored positively only in terms of using this method in the future to develop one's competencies. However, those areas connected to functions of mentoring for children scored negatively. According to teachers, the differences between students increased due to remote education; however, teachers also think that once children return to school, everything will return to normal as it used to be. According to the respondents, one can go through the curriculum via online lessons, but providing mentoring over the computer is impossible. Teachers' feelings of well-being were higher when: their assessment of remote education was positive, when teachers' level of competence in this form of education was sufficient for its introduction, and when relations with students were the same as during face-to-face education. The research shows that teachers' feelings of well-being are not very connected to different opinions in this area. It needs to be underlined that the efficacy of SEND students' education depends on many aspects, such as students' individual abilities, their background, the education system, and the application of proper education methods. The responding teachers ( $N = 49$ ) pointed out that they adapted the methods, forms, tools and materials to the needs of students. However, the majority of respondents did not share the opinion that remote education had benefits or that it allowed conveying knowledge in an interesting way. Despite using many innovative methods, techniques or tools, remote education cannot replace direct contact between teacher and student, which in turn can have a negative impact on the possibility of motivating students to work. Furthermore, it limits teachers' control over students' work, increases difficulties with verifying their identity and poses a risk of them not taking their exams unaided. The lack of teacher control weakens students' self-organisation and significantly decreases their self-discipline and motivation to learn. Moreover, limited contact with peers negatively affects the socio-emotional sphere of children and teenagers (Lorens, 2011).

## **Discussion**

Scientists more and more often emphasise that caring for children, which is the essence of an educator's work, can be exhausting during a pandemic (Sawchuck & Samuels, 2020). As our research has shown, Polish teachers feel more tired, sad and, above all, less involved in helping others during a pandemic. This

is consistent with what Jones and Kessler (2020) call for – teachers must receive specialist help and emotional support to prevent them from losing their sense of agency and identity, as well as the ability to take action for others as a result of the pandemic.

The research presented above and reports from other countries (Crane et al., 2021) show that teachers negatively assess the impact of the pandemic on the functioning of students with SEND. For this reason, publications containing recommendations for working with such children have been developed. Such articles provide, for example, a list of online teaching aids that can be used in working with children with SEND (Crane et al., 2021; Roberts & Bradley, 2021).

Despite the fact that teachers are increasingly better prepared for working online and declarations made that some of the e-learning solutions will also be used after returning to school (e.g. various computer programs, the possibility of conducting online tests, e-learning platforms), only 9% of teachers (according to our research) believe that remote education brings only benefits for teachers and students. The vast majority of teachers in Poland would like distance learning to become a thing of the past.

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## TEACHERS WORKING WITH STUDENTS WHO HAVE SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS AND DISABILITIES IN POLAND DURING THE SARS-COV-2 PANDEMIC

### Abstract

The global SARS-CoV-2 epidemic brought educational systems world-wide into disarray. The actions aimed at stopping the pandemic in Poland, undertaken at the national level, caused unplanned closures of schools, kindergartens, and other educational-therapeutic institutions. The changeable rate of viral infections in Poland caused the opening and closing of educational institutions at different times. This introduced disarray in the lives of teachers, students and all those engaged in the education process: parents, national decision-makers and administrators. The research presented in this book concerns the experiences and opinions of teachers working with students who have special educational needs and disabilities during the pandemic in mainstream schools, those with inclusion classrooms and in special schools in Poland.

Keywords: SEND students, teachers' difficulties, the COVID-19 pandemic, remote education

## POLSCY NAUCZYCIELE PRACUJĄCY Z UCZNIAMI ZE SPECJALNYMI POTRZEBAMI EDUKACYJNYMI W CZASIE PANDEMII WYWOŁANEJ WIRUSEM SARS-COV-2

### Abstrakt

Globalna epidemia wywołana wirusem SARS-CoV-2 spowodowała zachwianie systemów edukacyjnych na całym świecie. Działania na rzecz powstrzymania pandemii w Polsce, podejmowane na szczeblu krajowym, spowodowały zamknięcia szkół, przedszkoli i innych placówek

oświatowo-terapeutycznych. Zmienne tempo zakażeń wirusowych w Polsce powodowało w różnych okresach trudne do przewidzenia otwieranie i zamykanie placówek oświatowych. Wprowadzało to dezorganizację w życiu nauczycieli, uczniów i wszystkich osób zaangażowanych w proces edukacji: rodziców, decydentów państwowych i administratorów. Badania przedstawione w prezentowanym artykule dotyczą doświadczeń i opinii nauczycieli pracujących z uczniami ze specjalnymi potrzebami edukacyjnymi oraz niepełnosprawnościami w czasie pandemii w szkołach ogólnodostępnych z klasami integracyjnymi oraz w szkołach specjalnych w Polsce.

*Słowa kluczowe:* uczniowie ze specjalnymi potrzebami edukacyjnymi i z niepełnosprawnościami, trudności nauczycieli, pandemia COVID-19, edukacja zdalna