



# Coping With Challenges of the COVID-19 Lockdown in Public Education of Lithuania and Slovenia: Views of School Heads

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**Annotation.** This article presents the findings of a comparative research conducted during the lockdown among public school heads in Lithuania and Slovenia in spring 2020. The study highlights how the school heads organized remote education, what challenges they faced, what examples of good practice they developed, and how these could be used to deal with similar situations in the future. The research indicated significant school autonomy regarding the centralised support measures provided to Lithuanian and Slovenian schools.

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**Keywords:** *remote education, COVID-19 pandemic, school heads, equity, distributed leadership.*

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## Introduction

In mid-March 2020, more than 230,000 Slovenian and 459,000 Lithuanian students taught by nearly 21,000 teachers in Slovenia and 42,616 teachers in Lithuania transferred

their learning and work overnight from the physical to the virtual environment. The school heads had to deal with the demanding tasks of managing the whole school, arranging work for students, and supporting teachers in the implementation of remote teaching. This study identified and compared what challenges and issues the school heads faced in the first weeks of the epidemic in both countries, and positive experiences that may represent examples of good practice for dealing with similar problems in the future. The article opens with a theoretical introduction, including a discussion on the roles of the authorities, school heads, and teachers. The findings are accompanied by a brief description of both countries' contexts, and the article concludes with a comparison of the findings and conclusions.

## Theoretical Background

### *The Role of Educational Authorities*

When in 2010 the United Nations (General Assembly, 2010) and, five years later, the European Parliament (2015) adopted their resolutions – the former on the right to education in emergency situations, the latter on education for children in emergency situations and protracted crises – probably no one imagined that only a few years later there would arise an emergency affecting the entire planet. Both documents were written primarily with young people during the war and natural disasters in mind, but their content is now easily placed in the context of the current COVID-19 pandemic, which resulted in most students around the world not having access to schools and universities in the spring of this year. Most of them, especially in the technologically advanced world, had access to remote education, but many did not. Among others, the two resolutions emphasise, inter alia, that the right to education must also be exercised in emergency situations, with education becoming an integral part of each country's humanitarian plan; emergency education requires specially designed, flexible and inclusive approaches drawing on modern technology; and that quality education must give students a sense of normality, stability, structure and hope (General Assembly, 2010).

Although the two resolutions see the education authorities as the first responsible actors, it seems that the authorities worldwide have been unprepared for such events. During the global lockdown in spring, Joynes et al. (2020, p. 5) remarked that 'the policy and strategy landscape for COVID-19 educational responses – both globally and nationally – is best described as emerging and fluid.' Flexible but centralized approaches seem to be more effective, as they are 'able to mobilise their responses extremely quickly and have utilised their ability to take rapid action to enact substantial policy changes at short notice' (Joynes et al., 2020, p. 2). One of the first authorities to respond was the Chinese Ministry of Education that launched the 'Disrupted Classes, Undisrupted Learning'

initiative to provide flexible online learning in their homes (Huang et al., 2020). Flexibility appears at the level of the student and the education system. Considering differences in access to education, national and local authorities should 'prepare multi-modal responses, capitalizing on existing infrastructure and utilizing a combination of different learning media to ensure students are engaged and learning' (The World Bank Education Global Practice, 2020).

In doing so, the fundamental mission of the education system must not be neglected, and that is its contribution to the humanization and democratisation of humanity and human relations (Biesta, 2014; Jandrić, 2020 a, 2020 b). Yet, a fair functioning of the education system must not follow a meritocratic understanding that counts on the direct effects of domestic cultural capital's investment in children's knowledge (Medveš, 2020, p. 16). Domestic assistance is usually associated with home-schooling, and some argue (Apple, 2020) that the current response to the health crisis caused severe inequalities since remote education has had the form of home-schooling. DiMaggio and Hargittai (2001) specified that a key element of justice in education is digital justice, which should become an important goal of school policy, and which includes access to ICT and digital competences (Kodelja, 2020).

### *The Role of the School Heads*

While school heads are faced with very complex tasks, they are expected to respond to the local communities' and teachers' expectations, students' and parents' needs (Edwards et al., 2014; McCarty et al., 2014; Schleicher, 2015). Distributed leadership represents the main characteristics of successful leadership and is defined as a form of collective leadership in which educators develop expertise by working collaboratively (Harris, 2002). Distributed leadership, cooperation, collaboration among all employees, and the maintenance of a positive school climate are also vital in emergency situations (Harris, 2020; Harris and Jones, 2020; Leithwood et al., 2020; Netolicky, 2020). While leaders are expected to react to unstructured and unpredictable situations, emergency circumstances require both rapid reactions and reflection on the potential consequences this action may induce (Netolicky, 2020). School heads should maintain clear and goal-oriented, yet emphatic communication and sympathetic attitudes. They keep in mind that teachers are facing challenging situations and thus support their learning, professional development, innovation, and resilience (Kaminskienė et al., 2021). There is no neat blueprint for leadership in such times (Harris, 2020); leaders should be able to cope with ambiguity, to respond flexibly and quickly, and to change direction rapidly if required. Kerrissey and Edmondson (2020) accentuated four characteristics of exceptional leaders: acting with urgency, communicating with transparency, taking responsibility and focusing on solving problems, and engaging in constant updating. A strong capacity to think creatively and question events in new and insightful ways is also required, as well as optimism to persevere when all seems to be lost. Jacobs and Zmuda (2020) suggested

establishing a crisis management team, identifying key common technology platforms for communication, and using talents within the school community. Finally, Fernandez and Shaw (2020) recommended three best practices that can be emphasised during times of change: 1) connecting with people as individuals and establishing mutual trust, 2) distributing leadership throughout the organisation, and 3) communicating regularly, clearly and transparently with all stakeholders.

### *The Roles of the Teachers*

Teachers' role in remote education has been substantially researched and theorised upon (Bax, 2011a, 2011b). Yet, most of the research was focused either on the hybrid model of education or on the role of the teacher in higher education (i.e. open universities). In pre-university education, there is almost no experience and expertise, so the contemporary situation can be viewed as a period of intense learning for practitioners and researchers.

Teachers remain a key factor in implementing remote education and introducing change. In doing so, they can find significant support in the established collaborative culture among employees, in the social and cultural capital of the institution, and in opportunities to learn with and from one another (Flores et al., 2007; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Imants & van Veen, 2010; Louws et al., 2017; Seidel Horn & Warren Little, 2010). The teaching profession requires continuous learning, professional growth and reflection on one's work and expertise (Day, 2013; Edwards & Ellis, 2012). The quality of a teacher's professional development is ensured by a rich interaction between trust, support and challenges in a positive, stimulating school atmosphere and a culture established by all employees, students, parents and other external subjects (Čepić et al., 2019). Creating and maintaining such an institutional culture is essential for forging a learning community that is interactive and negotiative, creative and problem-solving, proactive and responsive, participative and collaborative, risk-taking and enterprising, evaluative and reflective (Forte & Flores, 2014; Holly & Southworth, 1989; Hord, 2004; Little, 2012; Stoll et al., 2006). A culture of collaboration empowers teachers to learn from one another, gives them opportunities for professional growth, and increases their motivation. The main characteristic of schools as learning communities is shared responsibility for the students' learning outcomes.

## **Research Background**

### *The Formal Role of the School Heads*

Schools in Slovenia are state controlled by appointment of representatives to governance bodies, public funding, adoption of common rules and guidelines of public service, centrally adopted curricula, etc. Within the limits of the nationally defined rules, school

heads enjoy considerable autonomy. Their responsibilities comprise both managerial and pedagogical leadership (Organisation and Financing of Education Act, 2017, Article 49). Managerial leadership entails dealing with finances, recruitment, and numerous regulations. As pedagogical leaders, school heads build relationships with employees, evaluate teachers' work and provide guidance, create a supportive school atmosphere, etc. (Dolgan, 2012; Organisation and Financing of Education Act, 2017). They are also responsible for the school quality, implementation of self-evaluation, and for students' wellbeing and ensuring that students' rights are exercised.

Similarly, the formal roles of Lithuanian school heads are defined by the Law of Education (1993, revised in 2020). School heads are responsible for the preparation of a strategic plan and annual activity plans of the educational institution, implementation of recommendations regarding the protection of children's rights, etc. They are responsible for the democratic management of the educational institution, have to ensure cooperative relations and suitable working conditions, recruit new teachers, manage resources of the educational institution, and are fully responsible for the results of the activities of the educational institution. School heads collaborate with school councils, municipality, Ministry of Education, etc. (Želvys et. al., 2019).

### *Teachers' Digital Competence*

Before the pandemic, teachers' digital competence attracted broad international attention, which has been conceptualised as a supportive or additional teacher ability. The European Commission (2019, p. 45) defines it as the ability to use digital technologies to communicate, collaborate, create and learn to facilitate the teaching and learning processes. As the schools were forced to transfer the entire educational process online, this ability became the most fundamental ability, a precondition for an educational process to occur at all. No country, school, or teacher was prepared for such situation, but better-off were systems with centralised strategies for digital education at the school level and external bodies responsible to support schools (ibidem). Slovenia and Lithuania both do have such strategies, and in both the teachers' digital competences development is becoming increasingly important in teacher training and continuous professional development programmes. However, only in Lithuania was a specific framework referring to the digital competences of teachers developed (Requirements for digital literacy development programmes, 2018). In Slovenia, many teachers utilise basic ICT tools in their teaching and are engaged in various ICT projects, but their engagement is voluntary and their digital competence is generally poor (European Schoolnet & University of Liege, 2012; OECD, 2019). In Lithuania, although only 45% of teachers' use of ICT was included in their formal education, 69% of them improved their ICT skills as part of continuous professional development programmes, and 62% indicated that they frequently or always let students use ICT for projects or class work (OECD, 2019).

## Research problem and research questions

The research established how school heads organized remote education during the spring lockdown in Lithuania and Slovenia, what challenges they faced, what examples of good practice they developed, and how these could be used to deal with similar situations in the future. It focused on similarities and differences between the two countries. The study was conducted in the respective national languages through an online questionnaire containing 12 single-answer, multiple-choice questions, one Likert scale, and two open-ended questions. For this study, three research topics were selected: the organisation of remote education, the work methods implemented by teachers in remote education, and the challenges faced, including their cooperation with the authorities.

### Sample

The non-randomly selected samples were highly representative, as they included 35% of the population of school heads in Lithuania and 21% of the population in the Slovenian case.

In Lithuania, the sample included 408 school heads, of which 17 were vocational school and 388 general education school heads of primary<sup>1</sup>, *progimnazija*, *gimnazija*, and other schools. At the beginning of the school year, there were 71 vocational training institutions and 1,056 general education schools in Lithuania.

In Slovenia, the sample comprised 144 respondents. Of these, 67.1% were primary school heads, 9.1% were *gimnazija* PIheads, 11.9% were secondary vocational school heads, 4.9% were *gimnazija* and vocational school heads, and 2.1% were heads of educational institutions for students with special needs.

**Table 1**  
*Characteristics of Research Participants*

Country	Gender ratio	Work experience	Work experience	Urban vs.
	(%) Women vs. man	(years) M	as school heads (years) M	rural ratio (%)
Lithuania	73.8 vs. 26.3 No answer: 6	30.8	14.9	63.5 vs. 36.5
Slovenia	65.7 vs. 34.3 No answer: 1	27.8	10.3	51.0 vs. 49.0

<sup>1</sup> In Lithuania, compulsory primary education starts at the age of 7 and lasts 4 years (primary school), followed by 4 years of basic education (*progimnazija*: lower-secondary). Upper secondary education includes 4-year general education (*gimnazija*) and vocational training programs which last from 1 to 3 years depending on the requirements of the national modular VET curricula. Vocational programs may be obtained after the completion of lower-secondary education or after graduating a *gimnazija*.

## *Data collection*

The school heads were invited to participate in the study via e-mail, social networks, and their professional association. In Slovenia, the study was conducted using an online questionnaire administered from 16 to 23 April, and in Lithuania from 6 to 26 May 2020.

## *Data analysis*

The data were analysed with the SPSS 25 software package and are presented in frequency tables. For the assessment of hypotheses, the  $\chi^2$ -test was used. Where conditions for it were not fulfilled (when more than 20% of cells had an expected count of less than 5), the Kullback test was used. To check the differences in the arithmetic means, the independent samples t-test was performed. Responses to open-ended questions were analysed according to qualitative analysis procedures. In the coding process, the codes were generated and grouped into parent categories.

## **Results**

### *Organisation of Remote Education*

School heads were asked how they organised remote education. The majority of the Slovenian schools started with remote education immediately after the lockdown (March 16), and the majority of the Lithuanian schools two weeks later because the government allowed them to prepare.

**Table 2**

*Organisation of Remote Education*

<b>How did your school organize remote education?</b>	<b>SLO (n = 139)</b>	<b>LIT (n = 409)</b>	<b><math>\chi^2</math> (df; p)</b>
1. We examined our technical capacities and the technical conditions that teachers have at home.	56 40,3%	276 67,5%	32.127 (df=1; p=0,000)
2. We prepared a short training session for teachers on the use of selected online tools for remote education (e.g. Moodle, Zoom, etc.).	52 37,4%	334 81,7%	97.565 (df =1; p=0,000)
3. We prepared written technical instructions for teachers on how to use selected online tools.	52 37,4%	186 45,5%	2.748 (df =1; p=0,097)
4. We prepared common didactic recommendations for all teachers.	65 46,8%	169 41,3%	1.256 (df =1; p=0,262)

How did your school organize remote education?	SLO (n = 139)	LIT (n = 409)	$\chi^2$ (df; p)
5. We prepared separate didactic recommendations (e.g. for teachers of younger and for teachers of older students)	18 12,9%	10 2,4%	23.611 (df =1; p=0,000)
6. Teachers agreed on the ways of working in their subject teams or programme groups.	83 59,7%	212 51,8%	2.591 (df =1; p=0,107)
7. Teachers did preparations independently and, if necessary, in cooperation with colleagues.	62 44,6%	219 53,5%	3.319 (df =1; p=0,068)
8. Teachers could rely on the support of ICT experts or teachers with good ICT skills	103 74,1%	263 64,3%	4.490 (df =1; p=0,034)

The school heads in both countries began by examining the technical resources the teachers had at home, organised training for teachers or prepared didactic recommendations, and organised school-based ICT support. Several statistically significant differences between the countries were noticed: systematic teacher training and examination of technical capacities and the technical conditions that teachers have at home were available more often to Lithuanian than to Slovenian teachers, while Slovenian teachers more often relied on support from ICT teachers or experts and preparation of separate didactic recommendations.

The challenge of transferring the whole educational process online was demanding from a technical perspective, which particularly occupied the Lithuanian school heads who immediately focused on the training of teachers, while Slovene school heads relied on informal, non-structured transfer of knowledge and support among the employees. The preoccupation with technical skills prevented schools in both countries from tackling quality issues systematically: teachers had to rely on their own resources.

The comparison of the results of both countries according to the frequency of individual items indicates that cooperation and support among teachers were more pronounced in Slovenia compared to Lithuania. It seems that cooperation is still a challenge that should attract school heads' attention in the future. In the open-ended responses, school heads in Lithuania noted a lack of cooperation at the beginning of the lockdown; however, they later observed positive changes as teachers tried to support each other, particularly sharing practices, which were not used before: *'For the first two weeks, we were preparing for remote training and it happened that teachers focused on small groups and learned to apply technologies that were not needed before,'* a school head observed.

In Slovenia, several school heads highlighted that some teachers had rejected ICT and were unwilling to learn. One of them commented: *'Before, when I wanted to encourage teachers to use more digital technology, I felt like a swimming teacher whose students do not want to jump into water. The pandemic forced the entire collective to jump into water, and*



they all learned how to swim, this way or another.’ After a while, many of them enthusiastically approached their work and, with the help of experienced colleagues, found they were progressing fast in their learning, becoming ever more confident and imaginative.

### *The Most Frequently Used Approaches to Remote Education in Schools*

We were interested in the communication channels schools and teachers used for their remote teaching. The respondents selected either one predefined answer or chose the other option.

**Table 3**

*The Most Frequently Used Approaches to Remote Education in Schools*

		SLO	LIT	Total
Teachers upload educational materials to online classrooms.	f	16	34	50
	f%	11.6%	8.3%	9.2%
Teachers send educational materials to students by e-mail.	f	15	13	28
	f%	10.9%	3.2%	5.1%
Teachers send educational materials to students by ordinary mail.	f	1	0	1
	f%	0.7%	0.0%	0.2%
Teachers upload educational materials to online classrooms, which they occasionally combine with live instruction (e.g. via Zoom).	f	36	34	70
	f%	26.1%	8.3%	12.8%
Teachers upload educational materials to online classrooms, which they often combine with live instruction (e.g. via Zoom).	f	46	314	360
	f%	33.3%	77.0%	65.9%
Other	f	24	13	37
	f%	17.4%	3.2%	6.8%
Total	f	138	408	546
	f%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

$$\chi^2 = 101.851 \text{ (df} = 5; p = 0.000)$$

Most schools in both countries combined uploading educational materials to online classrooms with regular live instruction. Regular live instruction was, however, statistically significantly more present in Lithuanian schools. The difference between the countries in this respect is large, and it also indicates that Lithuanian schools’ approach was more unified compared to the Slovenian one. This may be the consequence of Lithuanian schools having two weeks to prepare, which was not so for Slovenia. For Slovenia, the replies indicate a great variety of approaches, but most of these approaches have represented a one-way communication between teachers/schools and students. In the open-ended answers, some Slovenian school heads specified that they had gradually established a unified way of working at the school, with some teachers increasingly moving to more complex online tools. Others were favourably impressed by lessons via videoconferencing, noting the great importance of teachers’ contact with students.

In Lithuania, school heads also noted a rather high variety of online teaching approaches chosen by the teachers. Teachers regularly collected, evaluated, and exchanged different teaching materials using e-mail, electronic diary TAMO, and messenger. Online teaching was also provided differently. This availability of numerous measures was regarded by the school heads as an important advantage permitting adjusting to the new challenging conditions and to find suitable alternatives for those measures that do not work or are insufficient. However, it is also noticed that the choice of suitable measures and their adjustment for teaching can demand rather significant effort and time.

### *The Main Challenges*

Schools had to start the process of remote education very quickly, thus encountering different types of problems.

**Table 4**  
*The Main Challenges of Remote Education*

<b>Which aspects of remote education caused you the most problems?</b>	<b>SLO (n=137)</b>	<b>LIT (n=403)</b>	<b><math>\chi^2</math> (df; p)</b>
The quality of pedagogical work.	38 27.7%	106 26.3%	.108 (df =1; p=0,743)
Formative and summative assessment.	57 41.6%	220 54.6%	6.900 (df =1; p=0.009)
Ensuring as equal educational conditions as possible for all students.	108 78.8%	130 32.3%	89.975 (df =1; p=0.000)
Motivating teachers to work.	5 3.6%	58 14.4%	11.449 (df =1; p=0.001)
Some teachers' lack of skills to work with ICT.	24 17.5%	97 24.1%	2.524 (df =1; p=0.112)
Support for teachers in working with students.	18 13.1%	47 11.7%	.210 (df =1; p=0.646)
Technical difficulties.	12 8.8%	93 23.1%	13.381 (df =1; p=0.000)
Establishing regular time communication with parents or careers.	14 10,2%	115 28,5%	18.867 (df =1; p=0,000)
Students' responsiveness when working remotely.	65 47,4%	224 55,6%	2.722 (df =1; p=0,099)

Several statistically significant differences were noted: the Slovenian heads focused more on providing equal educational conditions to all students, while Lithuanian heads expressed more concern regarding assessment, motivating teachers to work, technical difficulties, communication with parents, and students' responsiveness. Providing equal educational conditions to all students was the main concern of the Slovenian respondents, while the responses of the Lithuanian school heads were much more dispersed. No one put the issue of the quality of pedagogical work to the forefront.

Interestingly, in Lithuania, more emphasis was given to the technical conditions and teacher training, while more technical difficulties were reported. A possible explanation might be that they used more sophisticated tools, which demand more skilfulness, reliable hardware, and strong internet connections.

The analysis of open questions indicated that teachers and school heads in both countries felt a lack of live contact with students: *'There is a lack of "live" contact with teachers and students. Students are very eager to return to school,'* a Lithuanian head teacher expressed the feelings of many. Remote education revealed key challenges related to insufficient students' experience and skills in self-regulated learning, decreased motivation, and engagement in the learning process. On the other hand, these challenges were partly associated with a need to improve the digital skills of teachers.

In both countries, positive changes were associated with the overall improved teaching practices, newly developed digital competences that allowed teachers to master remote education tools, strengthen collaboration and community spirit, improved communication, cooperation and sharing of experience between teachers, and a rapid adaptation to the changed situation. The pandemic situation also helped to strengthen dialogue and constructive cooperation with parents.

Additionally, we asked the school heads to assess the quality of the external support: a statistically significantly higher level of agreement was expressed by the Lithuanian heads with the statement that the Ministry was sufficiently responsive to their needs in times of emergency (SI:  $M = 2,91$ , LIT:  $M = 3,44$ ;  $t = 5,148$ ;  $df = 197,762$ ;  $p = 0,000$ ) and with the statement concerning cooperation with the two national institutes dedicated to the development of primary and general education (SI:  $M = 2,82$ , LIT:  $M = 3,16$ ;  $t = 3,693$ ;  $df = 239,533$ ;  $p = 0,000$ ). The school heads have a network of colleagues to whom they can turn for help and with whom they were probably able to establish a support network even during the pandemic.

Respondents from both countries agreed that a significant part of the challenges was related to the lack or inconsistency of government regulation and guidance during the crisis: *'I am surprised how it is possible that the ministry is so incompetent,'* a Slovenian school head critically remarked. Some school heads observed that lack of regulative guidance created significant uncertainty for the decision making. A Lithuanian school head explained: *'In extreme situations, there is a serious lack of essential centralised clear*

*instructions and rules. This would reassure communities and reduce the aspect of imaginary subjectivity.'*

### **Comparison**

The way school heads tackled the situation, two scenarios with some common and distinctive features, can be discerned from results. The differences were observed on several levels, particularly regarding the opportunities for systematic teacher training before and during the pandemic, the frequency of the two-way communication established between students and teachers, as well as the level of mutual support among the teachers.

Lithuanian school heads had two weeks to prepare for the remote education. They began by providing training for the teachers, looked for ICT experts' help, and many assured that teachers had written instructions on the use of available ICT tools. The preparation led to a more unified approach: their main goal was to transfer the educational process online predominantly in the form of live instruction combined with online classrooms, which is technologically and didactically a demanding task. Despite having some support from the authorities, they faced several obstacles, including the lack of some teachers' ICT skills and low motivation and responsiveness of students. They worried about the assessment and communication with students and parents. Despite the challenges, the trainings contributed to more regular use of those e-tools which enable two-way communication and thus provide better conditions for quality teaching and equitable education.

It seems that in Slovenia, school heads were more in a hurry and less ambitious. They started transferring the educational process online with familiar and reliable tools such as emails and online classrooms. Doing that they relied on the students' self-regulating learning skills and their parents' support abilities. Some tried to find other ways to reach the students according to their specifics and possibilities. Some schools cautiously began using different videoconferencing software. Since no recommendations were received from the authorities, school heads relied on both their teachers' abilities and views as well as their colleagues' experiences. This led to diversified approaches, which mostly maintained one-way communication between teachers and students, and which counted on the parents' support (cf. Kodelja, 2020; Medveš, 2020; Žmavc et al., 2020). Hence, it is not surprising that Slovenian school heads listed the equity problem among the biggest problems: they knew that only well-educated and digitally competent parents could support their children sufficiently. Consequently, some students' unresponsiveness was also one of the main problems in their view.

Despite the challenges, some positive outcomes of the situation were also observed in both countries. Findings indicate that great changes occurred in the schools' collectives: teachers have gradually lost their fear of technology and began exploring the possibilities the technology offers. They tried to improve their teaching, some became more creative and innovative. This was a boost for their professional learning, which would not have been so intense if the culture of collaboration (pronounced particularly among the Slovenian

teachers) and trust would not have accompanied it. They were ample opportunities for informal and mutual learning, for the strengthening of the distributed leadership and the culture of cooperation and trust.

## Discussion and conclusions

The authorities of both countries were unprepared for emergency situations, and their response was much slower compared to the schools' response. However, the authorities' support was assessed better by the Lithuanian heads, which indicates a more centralized approach of schools to the organisation of the remote education. Lack of flexible centralised support (Joynes et al., 2020) led to the diversified approaches of schools (much more in the Slovenian case) and was, as such, a direct threat to the quality and equity of remote education (Apple, 2020; Medveš, 2020). In both cases, the larger share of responsibility was transferred to the school heads. School autonomy is a reality of contemporary education, but the results again confirm the importance of the national authorities' support. Notably, school heads of both countries accentuated the equity issue more than the quality issue. Moreover, since teachers' digital competences are still developing and schools' and homes' technical capacities vary to a great extent, the negative impact of remote education during the lockdown on equal opportunities was undoubtedly severe. The issue of quality was less accentuated, yet more interactive approach to online teaching employed by the Lithuanian teachers (as compared to the Slovenia ones) can be expected to bring about better learning outcomes.

The research indicated significant school autonomy regarding the centralised support measures provided to Lithuanian and Slovenian schools. The education process proved to be not just a matter of the individual teachers; learning challenges were addressed collectively, with the help of each other. It seems that informal connections among the teachers were important and positively influenced their learning and the culture of collegiality among them (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Little, 2012; Netolicky, 2020; Stoll et al., 2006). The study revealed that the culture of cooperation and collegiality in schools has not been optimally developed in both countries, but the emergency situation triggered the school heads' awareness of its importance.

It seems that the differences between the countries arise mostly from three circumstances: the support of the authorities, the preparation time and the existing teachers' digital competences. Yet, in both cases, the research underlines the importance of the school heads' role in the process of changing ways of operation. School heads created an atmosphere of shared common goals, supported the processes of adapting to new challenges, and encouraged finding solutions (Harris, 2020; Kaminskienė et al. 2021; Kerrissey & Edmondson, 2020). They were determined to provide conditions for all their students to be included. Doing that, however, they stumbled upon unsurmountable differences in

opportunities of their students, causing a sense of helplessness and critique of the national authorities. The study again proves that responsibility, transparently distributed among national, local authorities, school leadership, and teachers, is a fundamental precondition for providing just and quality education.

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# COVID-19 pandemijos iššūkių valdymas Lietuvos ir Slovėnijos bendrojo ugdymo sistemoje: mokyklų vadovų požiūris

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## Santrauka

Šiame straipsnyje pateikiami palyginamojo Slovėnijos ir Lietuvos bendrojo ugdymo mokyklų vadovų tyrimo rezultatai. Tyrimas vykdytas pirmojo karantino (2020 m. balandžio ir gegužės mėn.) laikotarpiu, kai kontaktiniam darbui abiejose šalyse buvo uždarytos visos ugdymo įstaigos. 2020 m. kovo mėn. viduryje paskelbus COVID-19 epidemiją, mokyklos turėjo greitai sutelkti savo išteklius ir pasinaudoti savo gebėjimu imtis veiksmų, kad per trumpą laiką įvykdytų esminius ugdymo organizavimo pakeitimus, sudarydami sąlygas visiems mokiniams mokytis nuotoliniu būdu. Tyrimo metu buvo nustatyta, kaip mokyklų vadovai organizavo nuotolinį mokymą, su kokiais iššūkiais jie susidūrė, kokius gerosios praktikos pavyzdžius sukūrė ir kaip tie pavyzdžiai galėtų būti naudojami panašioms situacijoms spręsti ateityje. Apklausa buvo vykdoma lietuvių ir slovėnų kalbomis, naudojant internetinį dvylikos klausimų klausimą. Tyrimas atskleidė išryškėjusią mokyklų autonomiją centralizuotos pagalbos, teikiamos Lietuvos ir Slovėnijos mokykloms, atžvilgiu. Baigiamoji diskusija atskleidžia abiejų šalių panašumus ir skirtumus bei mokyklų vadovų, valdžios ir mokytojų vaidmenis.

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**Esminiai žodžiai:** *nuotolinis mokymas(is), COVID-19 pandemija, mokyklų vadovai, lyderystė.*

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