



Piloting a New Virtue Education Curriculum for 5–15-Year-Old Students: What are the Most Challenging Issues in Its Delivery?

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Annotation. The article analyses Latvian teachers' opinions regarding the feasibility of a virtue education curriculum for students aged 5–15 years, which they piloted in spring 2021, and identifies the challenges faced when implementing the virtue education curriculum during the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings showed that the curriculum could be delivered successfully in both modalities – face-to-face and online – since the teachers' approaches were creative and transformative in addressing all the challenges identified.

Keywords: *COVID-19, delivery mode, face-to-face learning and teaching, feasibility, online learning and teaching, pilot study, virtue education curriculum.*

Introduction and Research Context

Character education, also known as virtue education, is acknowledged as a crucial part of 21st-century school education (Retnowati et al., 2018; Rubin, 2017; Singh, 2019). It is especially important in the current situation for a number of reasons. First, COVID-19 created an urgent need to manage multiple ethical dilemmas, value conflicts, and moral disagreements (Conroy, 2021; Ishmaev et al., 2021); handle risks, injustice, and complexity and illuminate a pathway to flourishing (Fowers et al., 2021); and deal with various ethical and technically oriented challenges arising in cyberspace (Chang

& Chou, 2015; Dennis & Harrison, 2021). Other demands emerged as well: addressing the gap between traditional norms and cultures, and promoting creative means of sustainability, wellbeing and resilience (Crichlow & Philipsen, 2021); expanding the concept of resilience to the field of ethics education (Wald & Monteverde, 2021); reconsidering, revitalising, and strengthening virtue ethics and character education (Bellazzi & von Boyneburgk, 2020; Moulin-Stožek et al., 2022; Prasetya & Najiyah, 2021; Trisiana, 2021).

Second, the COVID-19 pandemic caused a massive global crisis, especially for children, as it changed all aspects of their lives, including education (Lobe et al., 2021; Save the Children, 2020; 2021a; 2021b; Taber, 2021). Online learning as a policy was imposed by various countries affected by the coronavirus, and its implementation during the pandemic led to difficulties in implementing character (virtue) education online (Mithhar et al., 2021; Prasetya & Najiyah, 2021; Santi & Widyasari, 2021; Solihati & Agustin, 2020). The practice of online learning throughout the COVID-19 pandemic has provided a huge space for students to cheat because of the lack of teacher control (Mithhar et al., 2021). However, online learning can also be perceived as an initial capital for students' self-improvement because it prepares them to become independent in the future (Intania & Sutama, 2020; Saputro et al., 2021). It cultivates their cyber-virtues, especially cyber-wisdom (Dennis & Harrison, 2021), and encourages the affective, cognitive and behavioural aspects of their morality in cyberspace, including aspirations to desire, know, and do good in cyber-society (Chang & Chou, 2015). It counteracts the negative influence of globalisation and COVID-19 online presence on students' behaviour (Intania & Sutama, 2020; Lobe et al., 2021; Prasetya & Najiyah, 2021) and minimises immoral or morally dubious human activities such as cyberbullying, trolling, and online humiliation (Dennis & Harrison, 2021; Harrison, 2014; 2016; 2022).

Third, it is crucial to consider character (virtue) education when aiming to enhance the quality of learning processes (Asad & Fridiyanto, 2020; Oktarina et al., 2021). With well-developed character (virtue) education, students are expected to possess a greater sense of independence, self-discipline, and responsibility towards learning, especially in the COVID-19 pandemic situation (Intania & Sutama, 2020; Suwarno et al., 2021).

Fourth, by strengthening character (virtue) education from early childhood (Daratista & Yusuf, 2021; Hasibuan & Rakhmawati, 2021) to higher and adult education (Bellazzi & von Boyneburgk, 2020; Lamb et al., 2021; Van Fossen et al., 2022; Wald & Monteverde, 2021), it is believed that moral awareness and courage will alleviate the adverse impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on people's holistic development since 'COVID-19 has become a barometer and an appraisal sheet about how much character education that has been taught in educational institutions permeates and incorporates people's thoughts and actions' (Prasetya & Najiyah, 2021, p. 107). Considering virtue education as a solution to the multiple problems arising from the pandemic (Fowers et al., 2021; Moulin-Stožek et al., 2022), mutual caring, solidarity, empathy, justice, courage, and practical wisdom can help address COVID-19-related challenges; therefore, 'opportunities for virtuous

actions and the pursuit of worthwhile ends abound, even, or especially, in a pandemic' (Fowers et al., 2021, p. 10).

To deal with the previously mentioned challenges and to flourish in cyberspace and in the material and non-material worlds, it is essential to make the learning processes, including character (virtue) education initiatives, more efficient in both face-to-face and online settings, particularly in COVID-19 and post-COVID periods (Gao, 2022; Otkarina et al., 2021). It should take into account the advantages of digitalisation, virtualisation, face-to-face communication, and collaboration and provide a holistic approach to character (virtue) education.

The current need for a holistic approach to character (virtue) education in Latvian schools has been revealed by several recent needs analysis studies (Surikova & Pīgozne, 2018; Fernández González, 2019a; 2019b). The studies have concluded that while there is awareness about the need for character (virtue) education and the actors involved, theoretical knowledge considering the content of character (virtue) education in school is lacking, and teachers are deficient in the digital skills and online resources needed to implement character (virtue) education in the classroom and online. Moreover, the challenges caused by the COVID-19 crisis (Lobe et al., 2021; Save the Children, 2020; 2021a; 2021b) and the immediate need to digitalise the educational system have heightened the demand for a character (virtue) education curriculum that could be delivered successfully, both face-to-face and online.

Theoretical Framework

Character (virtue) Education

A character is considered 'a set of personal traits or dispositions that produce specific moral emotions, inform motivation, and guide conduct' (The Jubilee Centre, 2022, p. 7), which includes nurturing civic, intellectual, performance, and moral skills. Character (virtue) education as a multifaceted concept embraces explicit and implicit educational activities that help students enhance their virtues as stable traits of character (Harrison et al., 2016; Harrison et al., 2020; The Jubilee Centre, 2022). It can be implemented in school through the ethos and atmosphere of the school environment and the relationships between students and school staff by emphasising the importance of teachers acting as role models for students (*caught approach*), by embedding character education in subjects or through discrete lessons focusing on character and virtues (*taught approach*) and through students' self-reflections on their characters and virtues (*sought approach*) (Arthur et al., 2022; Harrison et al., 2015; The Jubilee Centre, 2022). Harrison et al. (2020) stressed, 'Given the increased interest in character education across the world, educators are seeking guidance for their practice' (p. 617). In this regard, innovative teaching and learning resources (e.g., guides, handbooks, curricula) are needed in the field of character (virtue) education to be used in different national contexts and modalities.

Curriculum Development

According to character (virtue) education experts (McGrath et al., 2022), the term 'holistic' is one of the keywords describing character (virtue) education features. Holistic education could be implemented using an integrated, interdisciplinary, and contextual curriculum (Miller, 2019; Miseliunaite et al., 2022; Niehues, 2020; White & Shin, 2017). McGrath (2018) proposed the following criteria for elaborating on and assessing a character (virtue) education curriculum prototype: it is school-based and structured, and it addresses specific positive psychological attributes, identity, moral growth, holistic growth, and the development of practical wisdom (p. 26). Considering that planning, conducting, and evaluating are the three main pillars of curriculum development as a dynamic process (Rajurkar et al., 2019), teachers must play a pivotal role in every step of this process (Choppin et al., 2018; Gupta, 2020). When planning the development of a holistic curriculum, all its design levels (e.g., module, topic, lesson) should be considered (Surikova & Sidorova, *in press*). Choppin et al. (2018) introduced and defined 'curriculum ergonomics as the study of the interactions between design and use of curriculum resources' (p. 75), exploring how curriculum design can enable teachers to transform how they use curriculum resources and ultimately revamp their teaching practices.

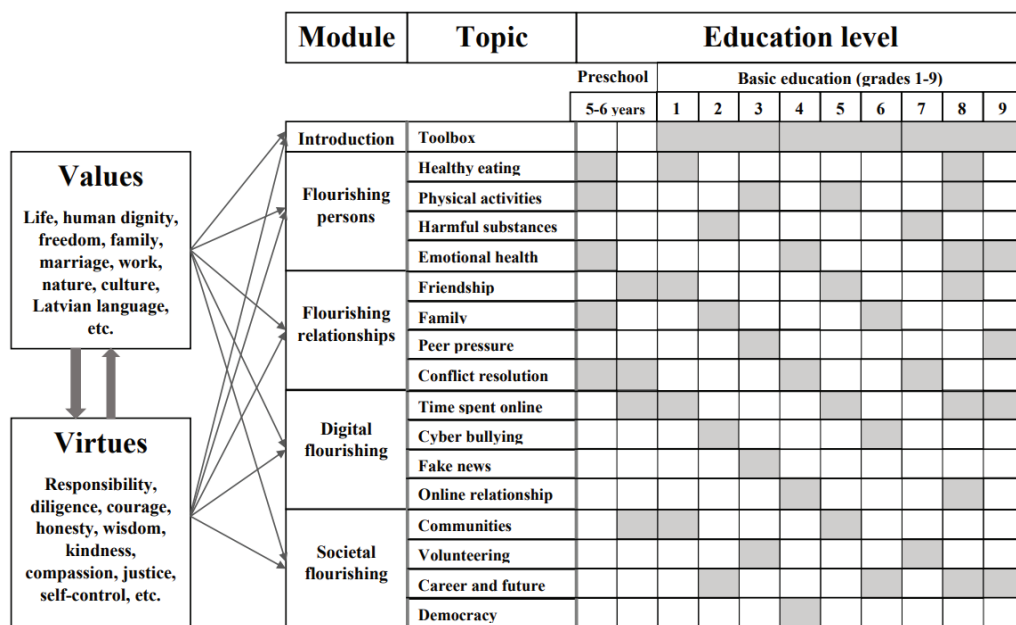
Pilot and Feasibility Studies

The theoretical background and methodological approach of this research were based on multiple pilot and feasibility studies (Eldridge et al., 2016; Fraser et al., 2018), especially in the field of curriculum research (Arthur et al., 2014; Davison et al., 2014; Kobiah, 2021). Fraser et al. (2018) emphasised, '...pilot and feasibility studies have recently become the focus of extensive debate in the health-related literature. It would be beneficial if similar attention were given to pilot and feasibility studies in the broader research context, including the education community' (p. 261). Eldridge et al. (2016) suggested viewing 'feasibility as an overarching concept, with all studies done in preparation for the main study open to being called feasibility studies, and with pilot studies as a subset of feasibility studies' (p. 18). They thus concluded, 'all pilot studies are feasibility studies, but not all feasibility studies are pilot studies' (Eldridge et al., 2016, p.8). In the field of curriculum research, in which this current study is situated, 'feasibility' considers whether it is possible to implement and maintain a successful curriculum (Arthur et al., 2014) and relates to how successfully the curriculum is designed and delivered (Davison et al., 2014). Pilot studies are useful as small-scale preliminary test cases conducted before any large-scale research to improve curriculum design and delivery by identifying weaknesses and challenges faced during implementation (Gudmundsdottir & Brock-Utne, 2010; Kobiah, 2021). According to Kobiah (2021), 'participation of teachers in curriculum piloting has received limited empirical attention' (p. 238), while reflective piloting can increase the validity of the research results (Gudmundsdottir & Brock-Utne, 2010) and help develop an evidence-based curriculum.

A New Virtue Education Curriculum

This research study examines the virtue education curriculum launched in Latvia in 2021 under research project ‘Fit and feasibility trial of an online curriculum for virtue education in Latvian educational institutions (for 5 to 15 years-old students)’ (No lzp-2020/2-0277). The curriculum was developed by practising teachers in cooperation with the research team. The five-module system was interconnected through the curriculum’s moral values and virtues, which were its learning outcomes (Figure 1). This curriculum is a step forward on the path to holistic character education in Latvia. The curriculum structure includes an introductory module (‘Toolbox’ for grades 1–3, 4–6, and 7–9) on virtue ethics, which is the philosophical approach of the curriculum, to acquaint students with the concepts related to virtues and the process of virtue development. The curriculum also comprises four thematic modules – flourishing relationships, flourishing persons, societal flourishing, and digital flourishing – for 5–15-year-old students’ character development via various learning situations using discussions, role games, group work, moral dilemmas, videos, and inspiring examples.

Figure 1
Structure of the Virtue Education Curriculum



All the materials offered in the curriculum (i.e., 124 detailed lesson plans with accompanying PowerPoint slides and printable resources for each lesson) are available online.

To ensure a well-designed and feasible curriculum for implementation in Latvian schools, the curriculum materials were tested in sample schools (small-scale implementation) to obtain feedback, which was used to revise the materials. In the research presented in this article, teachers were involved in piloting the curriculum, which allowed for identifying and correcting its major weaknesses before its large-scale implementation.

Research Methodology

Research aim and Questions

This article analyses Latvian teachers' thoughts regarding the feasibility of a virtue education curriculum for students aged 5–15 years during its pilot testing in spring 2021 and identifies the challenges faced when implementing the virtue education curriculum during the COVID-19 pandemic to enhance the curriculum's design and delivery as well as its ergonomics for further implementation in different modalities (face-to-face and online) within different education levels. To achieve the research goal, the following research questions were put forward:

Research question 1 (RQ1): How successfully were the main feasibility aspects of the virtue education curriculum addressed within different education levels and delivery modes as evaluated by teachers?

Research question 2 (RQ2): What main challenges did the teachers experience when implementing the virtue education curriculum with different education levels and delivery modes?

Participants

In the spring of 2021, 259 teachers from 79 educational institutions in Latvia participated voluntarily in the study: 77 of the teachers worked in preschool (29.7%), 54 taught grades 1–3 (20.9%), 72 taught grades 4–6 (27.8%), and 56 taught grades 7–9 (21.6%). The participants' work experience ranged from 1 to 46 years ($M = 18.90$, $SD = 11.392$). The majority of the participants were female (99.6%). The sample is representative of the Latvian education system with a margin of error 6%, considering that there were 21301 teachers in the 2020–2021 school year (i.e., 3783 preschool teachers working with children aged 5–6 years and 17518 general education teachers working in grades 1–9).

Research instruments and methods

Data were collected within research project 'Fit and feasibility trial of an online curriculum for virtue education in Latvian educational institutions (for 5 to 15 years-old students)' (No lzp-2020/2-0277), funded by the Latvian Council of Science. Two data

collection methods were used to collect the data: an online questionnaire survey and a focus group discussion. Two feedback questionnaires were used to collect fit and feasibility data from the teachers. Questionnaire 1 (i.e., the lesson plan questionnaire) included nine nominal scale questions and four open-ended questions to obtain information about the delivery process (e.g., online or face-to-face, delivery amount and time) and about the feasibility of the lesson plan (e.g., quality of the plan, content, usefulness of the support materials, and attractiveness of the activities). Questionnaire 2 (i.e., the topic questionnaire) included ten nominal scale questions and three open-ended questions to evaluate the feasibility (e.g., sessions per topic, didactics) and fit of the curriculum to the educational system at the micro, meso, and macro levels. The teachers also shared their experiences about how they coped with the challenges of curriculum implementation and their recommendations on how to improve the curriculum.

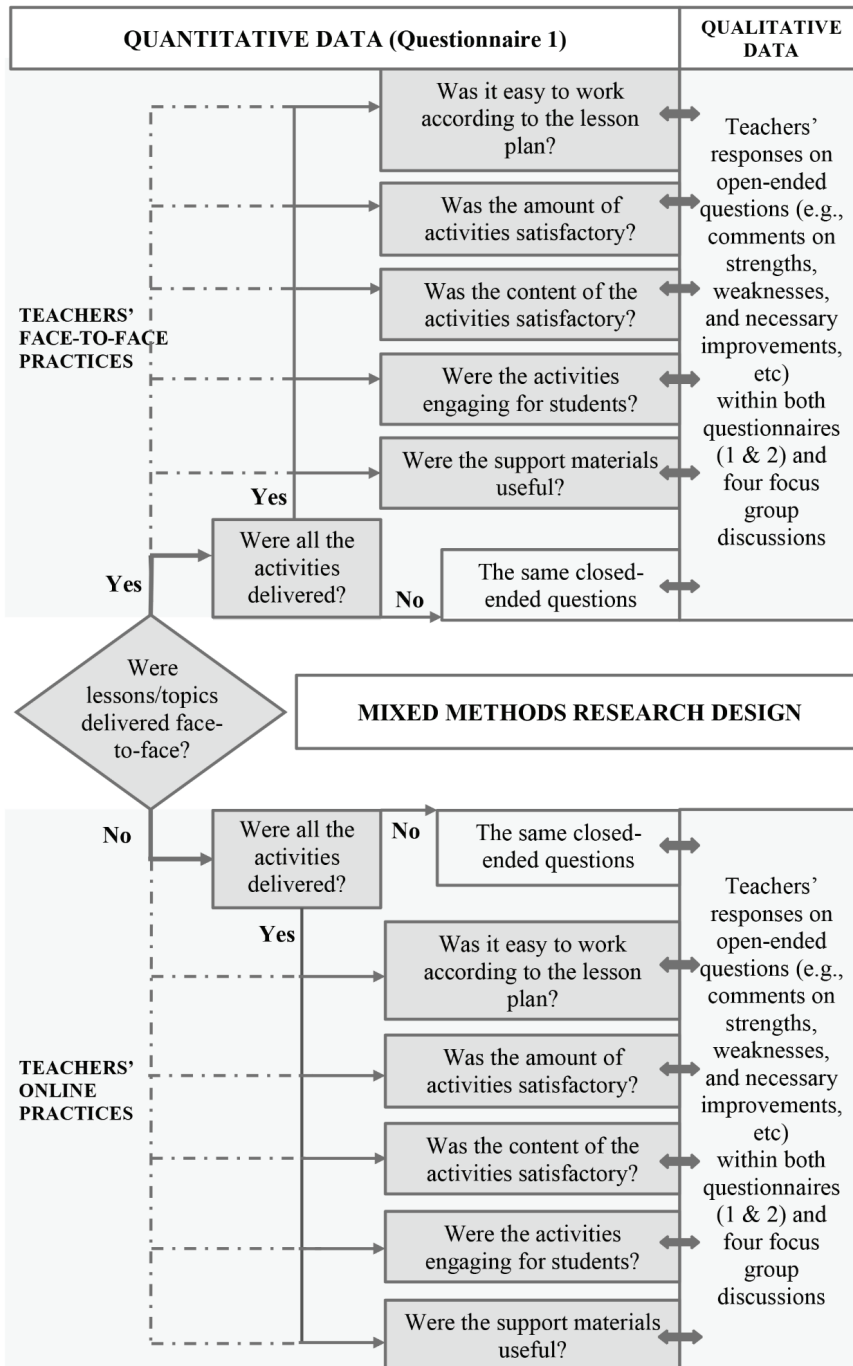
Data were processed and analysed within the research project 'Human, technologies, and quality of education' (No ZD2010/AZ22) funded by the University of Latvia. To measure the reliability of the two feedback questionnaires and to test the internal consistency of the sets of items of Questionnaires 1 and 2, Cronbach's alpha coefficients were calculated: $\alpha = .749$ for Questionnaire 1, $\alpha = .751$ for Questionnaire 2. To answer the research questions, the authors analysed the teachers' responses to the nine closed-ended questions of Questionnaire 1 and to the seven open-ended questions of both questionnaires, as well as the four focus group discussion transcriptions (Figure 2).

The research team used IBM SPSS Statistics software to perform the processing and analysis of the quantitative data (Questionnaire 1), and used cross-tabulation to demonstrate a breakdown of the quantitative data and to create contingency tables that represent the interaction between two or more categorical variables. Via Crosstabs, a Chi-square test of independence was accomplished to determine whether a statistically notable relationship existed between different categorical variables (i.e., whether the variables were independent or related), and then an estimate of effect size for statistically significant relationships was calculated and explained using the Phi (ϕ) coefficient for 2×2 contingency tables and Cramer's V (V) for larger contingency tables.

The qualitative data (i.e., the answers to the open-ended questions within two questionnaires, 42617 words) were processed and analysed using NVivo software, applying thematic analysis and coding. A combination of deductive (pre-set coding scheme) and inductive (codes generated while examining the collected data) approaches to coding was used (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). The content of the four focus group discussions (overall duration more than 6 hours) was used for comparative triangulation of results. The data were analysed in the original (Latvian) language, and only the relevant quotes were translated into English.

Figure 2

Quantitative and Qualitative Data Analysed Within the Questionnaires and Focus Group Discussions



Research Design and Procedure

In the spring of 2021, a fit and feasibility study was carried out based on the opinions of teachers who piloted and validated the virtue education curriculum. Teachers' practices were analysed by employing a mixed methods research design and combining and triangulating the elements of quantitative and qualitative research to answer the research questions (Figure 2).

Teachers tested in their classrooms one or more of the 124 lesson plans offered for the pilot tests and validation and completed two feedback questionnaires. Questionnaire 1 was administered after implementing each lesson plan (N = 945), and Questionnaire 2 was administered following the completion of a whole topic (N = 363). In total, 1308 completed questionnaires were received: 360 for preschool materials, 287 for grades 1–3, 371 for grades 4–6, and 290 for grades 7–9 (see Table 1).

Table 1
Questionnaire Results Concerning Virtue Education Curriculum Fit and Feasibility

Education level I (age)	Questionnaire 1	Questionnaire 2	Overall
	Lesson plan questionnaires	Topic questionnaires	
Preschool (5–6 years)	265	95	360
Grades 1–3 (7–9 years)	212	75	287
Grades 4–6 (10–12 years)	268	103	371
Grades 7–9 (13–15 years)	200	90	290
Total	945	363	1308

Four focus group discussions lasting one hour each were carried out in June 2021 with fourteen teachers and nine project staff members. The teachers, who taught preschool, grades 1–3, grades 4–6, and grades 7–9, were first acquainted with the preliminary results of the analysis of the questionnaires and were invited to discuss and interpret them. The discussion centred on the fit of the curriculum to the Latvian education ecosystem (at the country, educational institution, teacher and student levels) and its fit by grades and classroom practice.

Results

RQ1: How successfully were the main feasibility aspects of the virtue education curriculum addressed within different education levels and delivery modes as evaluated by teachers?

Crosstabs were used to display a breakdown of the quantitative data and to describe the relationships between education level and delivery mode (Table 2), between education level and various lesson feasibility aspects (Tables 3, 4 and 5) and between delivery mode and various lesson feasibility aspects (Tables 3, 4 and 5). A Chi-square test showed that a significant association existed with a large effect between education level and delivery mode both on lesson level ($X^2(3) = 693.5, p < .001, V = .857$) and on topic level ($X^2(6) = 276.4, p < .001, V = .617$). Most of the preschool lessons/topics were delivered face-to-face, but the lessons/topics for grades 1-9 were mainly delivered online (Table 2). This difference in mode could be explained by strict restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic: while the preschool educational process was organised via face-to-face communication, the school educational process was organised remotely, with some exceptions for schools located in municipalities with a relatively low number of COVID-19 cases.

Table 2

Frequencies of the Virtue Education Curriculum Delivery Modes on Lesson/Topic Level (%)

Education level (age)	Delivery mode on lesson level		Delivery mode on topic level		
	Online ^a	Face-to-face ^b	Online ^a	Face-to-face ^b	Both ^c
Preschool (5–6 years)	0.8	99.2	1.1	97.8	1.1
Grades 1–3 (7–9 years)	95.3	4.7	92.0	2.7	5.3
Grades 4–6 (10–12 years)	86.9	13.1	82.5	9.7	7.8
Grades 7–9 (13–15 years)	92.0	8.0	90.0	7.8	2.2
Total	65.7	34.3	65.0	30.9	4.1

Note. ^a The online delivery mode is based on implementing the virtue education curriculum lessons/topics in different online environments. ^b The face-to-face delivery mode involves implementing the virtue education curriculum lessons/topics via face-to-face communication in the classroom. ^c Some lessons within the topic were delivered online, while other lessons within the same topic were delivered face-to-face.

A significant association with a medium effect was observed between education level and number of activities delivered ($X^2(3) = 96.7, p < .001, V = .320$) and with a small effect between the delivery mode and number of activities delivered ($X^2(1) = 103.6, p < .001$,

$\phi = .331$). The higher the education level, the less the teachers implemented the activities; e.g., all activities were delivered within 90.9% of lessons at the preschool level, 72.2% of lessons in grades 1–3, 61.2% of lessons in grades 4–6, and within 52.0% of lessons in grades 7–9. Of all activities, 91.0% were delivered via face-to-face lessons and 59.1% were delivered online. No significant association was found between education level and lesson plan feasibility ($X^2(9) = 5.8, p = .758$) or between delivery mode and lesson plan feasibility ($X^2(3) = 3.4, p = .332$). In general, for all education levels, it was ‘easy’ to work according to the lesson plan in 59.8% of the lessons and ‘rather easy’ in 36.8% of the lessons (Table 3).

Table 3

Delivery Amount and Lesson Plan Quality: Frequencies of Lessons Delivered (%)

Education level (age)	Delivery mode	Were all activities delivered?		Was it easy to work according to the lesson plan?			
		Yes	No	Yes	Rather yes	Rather no	No
Preschool (5–6 years)	Online	-	100	50.0	50.0	-	-
	Face-to-face	91.6	8.4	60.4	35.4	4.2	-
	Total	90.9	9.1	60.4	35.4	4.2	-
Grades 1–3 (7–9 years)	Online	71.3	28.7	55.9	39.6	4.0	0.5
	Face-to-face	90.0	10.0	70.0	30.0	-	-
	Total	72.2	27.8	56.5	39.2	3.8	0.5
Grades 4–6 (10–12 years)	Online	57.5	42.5	60.1	37.8	1.7	0.4
	Face-to-face	85.7	14.3	74.3	25.7	-	-
	Total	61.2	38.8	61.9	36.2	1.5	0.4
Grades 7–9 (13–15 years)	Online	48.4	51.6	58.2	39.1	2.7	-
	Face-to-face	93.8	6.2	75.0	12.4	6.3	6.3
	Total	52.0	48.0	59.5	37.0	3.0	0.5
Total	Online	59.1	40.9	58.2	38.8	2.7	0.3
	Face-to-face	91.0	9.0	63.0	33.0	3.7	0.3
	Total	70.1	29.9	59.8	36.8	3.1	0.3

No significant association was found between education level and number of activities proposed ($X^2(9) = 5.9, p = .746$) or between the delivery mode and the number of activities proposed ($X^2(3) = 2.2, p = .523$). In general, for all education levels, the number of activities was ‘satisfactory’ for 56.6% of lessons and ‘rather satisfactory’ for 38.0% of lessons (Table 4). A significant association was found with a small effect between education level and the content of activities proposed ($X^2(9) = 25.7, p = .002, V = .095$): the teacher perceived the content of the activities as less satisfactory in grades 1-3. No significant

association was observed between delivery mode and the content of the activities proposed ($X^2(3) = 2.6, p = .460$).

Table 4

Amount and Content of the Activities Proposed: Frequencies of Lessons Delivered (%)

Education level (age)	Delivery mode	Was the amount of activities satisfactory?				Was the content of the activities satisfactory?			
		Yes	Rather yes	Rather no	No	Yes	Rather yes	Rather no	No
Preschool (5–6 years)	Online	100	-	-	-	100	-	-	-
	Face-to-face	58.2	36.1	5.7	-	61.2	33.1	5.3	0.4
	Total	58.5	35.8	5.7		61.5	32.8	5.3	0.4
Grades 1–3 (7–9 years)	Online	52.5	43.6	3.5	0.5	47.5	44.6	7.4	0.5
	Face-to-face	80.0	20.0	-	-	50.0	50.0	-	-
	Total	53.8	42.5	3.2	0.5	47.6	44.8	7.1	0.5
Grades 4–6 (10–12 years)	Online	56.7	36.5	6.0	0.9	64.4	34.3	0.9	0.4
	Face-to-face	57.2	37.1	5.7	-	71.4	28.6	-	-
	Total	56.7	36.6	6.0	0.7	65.3	33.6	0.7	0.4
Grades 7–9 (13–15 years)	Online	55.4	39.7	4.9	-	60.3	35.9	3.8	-
	Face-to-face	75.0	18.8	-	6.2	56.3	31.3	12.5	-
	Total	57.0	38.0	4.5	0.5	60.0	35.5	4.5	-
Total	Online	55.1	39.6	4.8	0.5	57.8	38.0	3.9	0.3
	Face-to-face	59.6	34.9	5.2	0.3	61.7	33.1	4.9	0.3
	Total	56.6	38.0	5.0	0.4	59.2	36.3	4.2	0.3

No significant association was found between education level and attractiveness of the activities proposed ($X^2(9) = 14.9, p = .095$), and a significant association was found with a small effect size between delivery mode and attractiveness of the activities proposed ($X^2(3) = 17.8, p < .001, V = .137$): the teachers perceived the activities delivered face-to-face as more engaging for students. No significant association was found between delivery mode and usefulness of the support materials ($X^2(3) = 2.9, p = .402$); however, a significant association was found with a medium effect between education level and usefulness of the support materials ($X^2(9) = 41.9, p < .001, V = .122$): the teachers perceived the support materials as more useful in grades 4–6 and grades 7–9 (Table 5).

Table 5

Attractiveness of the Activities and Usefulness of the Support Materials: Frequencies of Lessons Delivered (%)

Education level (age)	Delivery mode	Were the activities engaging for students?				Were the support materials useful?			
		Yes	Rather yes	Rather no	No	Yes	Rather yes	Rather no	No
Preschool (5–6 years)	Online	50.0	50.0	-	-	100	-	-	-
	Face-to-face	68.1	28.1	3.8	-	65.4	30.4	3.8	0.4
	Total	67.9	28.3	3.8	-	65.7	30.1	3.8	0.4
Grades 1–3 (7–9 years)	Online	53.0	43.6	3.5	-	58.9	38.6	2.5	-
	Face-to-face	70.0	30.0	-	-	80.0	20.0	-	-
	Total	53.8	42.9	3.3	-	59.9	37.7	2.4	-
Grades 4–6 (10–12 years)	Online	57.9	39.9	1.7	0.5	79.4	19.3	0.9	0.4
	Face-to-face	68.6	22.9	8.6	-	94.2	2.9	-	2.9
	Total	59.3	37.7	2.6	0.4	81.4	17.2	0.7	0.7
Grades 7–9 (13–15 years)	Online	57.6	39.1	3.3	-	76.6	20.7	2.2	0.5
	Face-to-face	68.8	25.0	6.3	-	93.8	-	6.2	-
	Total	58.5	38.0	3.5	-	78.0	19.0	2.5	0.5
Total	Online	56.2	40.9	2.7	0.2	72.0	25.9	1.8	0.3
	Face-to-face	68.2	27.5	4.3	-	70.4	25.6	3.4	0.6
	Total	60.3	36.3	3.3	0.1	71.4	25.8	2.4	0.4

RQ2: What main challenges did the teachers experience when implementing the virtue education curriculum with different education levels and delivery modes?

By coding and analysing the teachers' answers to the open-ended questions in both questionnaires, the main challenges to implementing the virtue education curriculum within different education levels and delivery modes were identified (Table 6).

Table 6*The Main Challenges Based on the Results of Coding and Analysing the Qualitative Data*

The main challenges identified	Delivering mode	Education level (age)			
		Preschool (5–6 years)	Grades 1–3 (7–9 years)	Grades 4–6 (10–12 years)	Grades 7–9 (13–15 years)
A lack of connection to real life	Online	-	6 (4.6%)	4 (2.8%)	5 (2.8%)
	Face-to-face	-	-	-	2 (1.1%)
A lack of correspondence to pupils' age	Online	-	22 (16.8%)	12 (8.3%)	7 (3.9%)
	Face-to-face	28 (30.1%)	-	-	1 (0.6%)
A lack of fit to Latvian context	Online	-	10 (7.6%)	7 (4.8%)	7 (3.9%)
	Face-to-face	2 (2.2%)	-	1 (0.7%)	2 (1.1%)
A lack of good examples, videos	Online	-	17 (12.9%)	10 (6.9%)	6 (3.5%)
	Face-to-face	11 (11.8%)	1 (0.8%)	-	4 (2.3%)
A lack of interactivity	Online	-	4 (3.1%)	4 (2.8%)	4 (2.3%)
	Face-to-face	15 (16.1%)	-	-	2 (1.1%)
A lack of logic and sequence	Online	-	2 (1.5%)	1 (0.7%)	2 (1.1%)
	Face-to-face	5 (5.4%)	-	-	-
A lack of time	Online	-	16 (12.2%)	36 (24.8%)	49 (27.8%)
	Face-to-face	26 (27.9%)	5 (3.8%)	1 (0.7%)	6 (3.5%)
Technical problems	Online	-	3 (2.3%)	9 (6.2%)	3 (1.7%)
	Face-to-face	-	-	-	-
Online delivering mode as an obstacle	Online	1 (1.1%)	22 (16.8%)	37 (25.5%)	50 (28.4%)
	Face-to-face	-	-	-	-
Technical weaknesses in material content and design	Online	-	22 (16.8%)	23 (15.8%)	23 (13.2%)
	Face-to-face	5 (5.4%)	1 (0.8%)	-	3 (1.7%)
<i>Total count of cases</i>		93 (100%)	131 (100%)	145 (100%)	176 (100%)

The younger the children, the less the curriculum corresponded to the pupils' age and the more it lacked interactivity, particularly at the preschool level. At all education levels, the most topical problems are related to a lack of time, especially while working face-to-face with preschool children and while working online with students in grades 4–6 and 7–9. The teachers also perceived the online delivery mode as a serious obstacle. Compared with preschool teachers, school teachers were more likely to highlight technical weaknesses in material content and design. Table 7 presents examples of the teachers' main challenges and their solutions.

Table 7*Examples of Teachers' Expressions Regarding the Main Challenges and Their Solutions*

The main challenges identified	Examples of teachers' expressions	
	Within the questionnaires	Within the focus group discussions
A lack of connection to real life	<p>'The whole topic lacks examples from a real first-grader everyday life'. (grades 1-3)</p> <p>'Pupils have not encountered such a case so far, so it was difficult for them to answer and imagine things'. (grades 4-6)</p>	<p>'I took what fits my class and is relevant to my students'. (grades 7-9)</p> <p>'I have been with my students for three years now. I know my students quite well. The discussion about the connection of character traits with professions through their families (fathers, mothers, other relatives) suited my students well'. (grades 7-9)</p>
A lack of correspondence to pupils' age	<p>'It was not easy to work, the given content had to be adapted for preschoolers'. (preschool)</p> <p>'The materials are good, but I think they are too complicated for the fifth grade. I had to explain a lot'. (grades 4-6)</p> <p>'The topic of international conflicts was challenging for my students; they found it difficult to give examples, think, justify their answers, and discuss the topics'. (grades 7-9)</p>	<p>'At present, various discussions and talks with pupils are included in preschool lesson plans which is one of the inconsistencies of this age. Practical activities (e.g., games, role-plays, songs, and rhymes about a virtue that include the words of virtues) should be used more often'. (preschool)</p>
A lack of fit for Latvian context	<p>'It would be better to use more literary works by Latvian authors, folklore materials'. (preschool)</p> <p>'As this is a programme for Latvia, I encourage you to use stories about Latvian people and personalities and their life experiences as examples. Attention should be paid to whether the materials translated from English and offered to students are in good and correct Latvian'. (grades 7-9)</p>	<p>'It would be preferable to replace video materials in English with fairy tales, stories, cartoons, poems in Latvian'. (preschool)</p> <p>'In the Latvian context, priority must be given to national values, including the Latvian language, regardless of who speaks or does not speak English'. (grades 4-6)</p>
A lack of good examples, videos	<p>'More videos could be offered to preschoolers'. (preschool)</p> <p>'It would have been interesting and useful if there were some videos about the people in Latvia, their experiences, both positive and negative'. (grades 4-6)</p> <p>'More examples are needed and some video materials, such as situation analysis'. (grades 7-9)</p>	<p>'I was looking for additional videos, for example, if people were mentioned – athletes, actors, etc. – I first showed a short video about this person, his/her role in the context of the topic'. (grades 4-6)</p>

The main challenges identified	Examples of teachers' expressions	
	Within the questionnaires	Within the focus group discussions
A lack of interactivity	<p>'Activities can be even more interactive, more physical, to involve children – it could be role-plays, or pupils could use some toys'. (preschool)</p> <p>'Worksheets may be applied to a remote process to make them interactive'. (grades 1–3)</p> <p>'It would be advisable to use interactive platforms for the lessons'. (grades 7–9)</p>	<p>'Various interactive tools during this remote time helped me to build a constructive dialogue and to provide a safe, supportive, and interactive environment for communication'. (grades 7–9)</p>
A lack of time	<p>'At preschool age, however, it takes longer to explain the concept and essence of each value'. (preschool)</p> <p>'Grade 2 children do everything slower and spend a lot of time on microphones, cameras, and extra activities'. (grades 1–3)</p> <p>'There was a lack of time because the students were ready to discuss, and everything was slower in distance learning than it would have been in person'. (grades 7–9)</p>	<p>'I ran out of time; I think every lesson should be divided into two more. I did not want to push forward when the students started discussing. You can offer more classes per topic'. (grades 7–9)</p> <p>'The lesson plan is supportive; each teacher can choose how long, how much, how deeply, and how widely to implement it'. (preschool)</p>
Technical problems	<p>'The video does not go on the Zoom platform (students do not play the movie, there is no sound), they cannot play situations'. (grades 1–3)</p> <p>'The lesson took place remotely listening to the "Brainstorm" song. We could not exit YouTube and it took about 10 minutes for us to close Zoom again before we were able to continue the lesson'. (grades 4–6)</p> <p>'There was a problem with our internet connection'. (grades 7–9)</p>	<p>'I use mentimeter.com, but when the internet was slow and I had to wait a long time, the students quickly got bored'. (grades 4–6)</p> <p>'It takes about 5–10 minutes for all students to join the class. I tried to organise group work on the Zoom platform, but there was a lot that we did not technically achieve'. (grades 4–6)</p>
Online delivering mode as an obstacle	<p>'In the online lesson, we did not implement the role play; instead, we discussed the steps of the proposed situation'. (grades 4–6)</p> <p>'It is relatively difficult to have a discussion online when you do not see what the children are doing on the other side of the screen'. (grades 4–6)</p> <p>'By working remotely, students have become more passive. It is also difficult to understand their emotions from a distance'. (grades 7–9)</p>	<p>'We worked on the Zoom platform. We discussed situations in groups. The children liked it. Of course, it would be better to attend real lessons. During the online learning, you must prepare a little more to prepare for the lessons fully'. (grades 4–6)</p>

The coding and analysis of the teachers' answers to the open-ended questions of the two questionnaires (Table 8) showed that the teachers' creative and transformative approaches affected the curriculum implementation: preschool teachers and teachers of grades 1–3 mainly used co-modelling (72 evidences were found) when implementing the virtue education curriculum materials and added some new resources, activities, and tools to increase the interactivity level of the activities and materials and ensure they corresponded to the children's age:

- 'I followed the plan, but I also used my own ideas in the lesson. I found stories with different situations where the children had to comprehend which hero's superpower (virtue) would be needed. The children chose one superpower (or virtue) and drew their superheroes in pairs. The task was to draw in silence. One drew, for example, a head, the other a belly, and so on. Then, the name of the superhero was invented. Each group then presented its superhero. The children had the opportunity to make their own superhero masks using the materials available in the group. The children really liked this theme'. (preschool)
- 'I supplemented it with self-prepared methodological materials and conversations with children based on their personal experiences. We made "emotion dolls" and played different situations, made "emotion dice" and played an emotion negotiation game'. (preschool)
- 'I included in the lesson the results of surveys of students about their parents' occupations and their answers. It was interesting for the children to know what the parents' professions are in the class (then it was easier to think of the names of the professions in group work), why the parents chose this profession, what they liked about their work, and what virtues they needed. Based on these answers, it was easier for the children to give their own answers'. (grades 1–3)
- 'I would recommend paying more attention to the image of a human created by the students. For example, I asked my students to create an image of an ideal friend, then complete the image with the characteristics of a friend, and send it to their friend to please him'. (grades 1–3)

The majority of teachers for 4–6 grades and teachers for 7–9 grades mainly used remodelling (60 evidences were found) based on implementing the virtue education curriculum materials after making some corrections/modifications (e.g., changes in the lesson plan structure and content, changes in the support materials structure and content) to adapt the activities and materials for using online and to save time:

- 'We did not perform the activity "Two truths and one lie" because, in distance learning, it would take a lot of time, so I chose to skip it'. (grades 4–6)
- 'I replaced the work in pairs with a discussion for the whole class to save time. I also placed a Word document with text in the "Mykoob" attachment and invited the students to get acquainted with it beforehand'. (grades 7–9)
- 'I combined the offered questionnaires and created one – choose from the list 5 virtues that you have and write three virtues that you would like to develop'. (grades 7–9)

- ‘We did not write a letter, but everyone expressed their main idea, which they would have written’. (grades 7–9)

Table 8

Modelling Levels Identified Based on the Results of Analysing the Qualitative Data

Education level (age)	Delivering mode	Modelling level			
		Non-modelling ^a	Co-modelling ^b	Remodelling ^c	Co-remodelling ^d
Preschool (5–6 years)	Online	-	-	-	-
	Face-to-face	14 (25.9%)	44 (47.3%)	9 (10.2%)	4 (30.7%)
Grades 1–3 (7–9 years)	Online	13 (24.1%)	25 (26.9%)	19 (21.6%)	1 (7.7%)
	Face-to-face	1 (1.9%)	3 (3.2%)	-	-
Grades 4–6 (10–12 years)	Online	11 (20.4%)	11 (11.8%)	25 (28.4%)	2 (15.4%)
	Face-to-face	3 (5.5%)	-	2 (2.3%)	-
Grades 7–9 (13–15 years)	Online	10 (18.5%)	8 (8.6%)	32 (36.4%)	6 (46.2%)
	Face-to-face	2 (3.7%)	2 (2.2%)	1 (1.1%)	-
<i>Total count of cases</i>		<i>54 (100%)</i>	<i>93 (100%)</i>	<i>88 (100%)</i>	<i>13 (100%)</i>

Note. ^a The non-modelling level (fidelity) is based on implementing the virtue education curriculum materials without any corrections/modifications. ^b The co-modelling level (expansion) is based on implementing the virtue education curriculum materials and adding some new aspects (e.g., resources, activities, tools). ^c The remodelling level (correction) is based on implementing the virtue education curriculum materials after making some corrections/modifications (e.g., changes in the lesson plan structure and content, changes in the support materials structure and content). ^d The co-remodelling level (expansion and correction) is based on implementing the virtue education curriculum materials by making some corrections/modifications and adding some new aspects (e.g., replacing with new resources, activities, tools).

As mentioned previously, the teachers were invited during focus group discussions to discuss and interpret the results of the analysis of the questionnaires to provide solutions for the main challenges identified. The main remarks concerned the flexibility, variety, and interdisciplinarity of the virtue education curriculum materials:

- ‘I have spoken to colleagues who have participated in the approval of the materials of this programme. Everyone thinks that the materials of the programme are very well developed, valuable, flexible and interdisciplinary, providing cross-curricular links’. (grades 7–9)
- ‘Materials are varied; they can be adapted to your needs. The year passes and the video stories change, other current events, those video reels will not fit for five years, they are now relevant, after a while, there will be other current events to show, the teachers can find the film themselves, but the theoretical basis and worksheets remain’. (grades 7–9)

- ‘Pictures and/or language are not a problem compared to the valuable lesson plans offered. The picture can be changed if you don’t like it; the language can be simplified if you don’t like it. Each teacher is the leader for their lesson... the basic information is huge – very valuable, everyone can further process the material for their own class needs. I very much appreciate these lesson plans that have been developed’. (grades 4–6).

Discussion

The present study examined the implementation of the new virtue education curriculum by Latvian preschool and basic education teachers, who piloted and validated the curriculum in spring 2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings offer a valuable contribution to the empirical studies that have enabled the participation of teachers as co-creators to pilot and improve the curriculum.

To answer RQ1 (How successfully were the main feasibility aspects of the virtue education curriculum addressed within different education levels and delivery modes as evaluated by teachers?), it is necessary to point out that most of the lessons for preschoolers were held face-to-face, while the lessons for grades 1–9 were mainly delivered online because of COVID-19 restrictions. In general, within all education levels, the teachers considered the lesson plan feasibility, the amount and attractiveness of the activities ‘satisfactory’ or ‘rather satisfactory’. Teachers at all education levels said that it was easy to follow the activities according to the lesson plan. However, the higher the education level, the lower the extent to which all activities were implemented. Furthermore, teachers in grades 1–3 perceived the content of activities as less satisfactory, and teachers in grades 4–6 and 7–9 found the support materials more useful. There was no significant association between the delivery mode (face-to-face or online) and lesson plan feasibility, amount and content of activities proposed, and usefulness of the support materials. However, the activities delivered face-to-face were perceived by teachers as more engaging for students and the extent of implementing all the activities was lower within the online delivering mode compared to face-to-face delivering mode.

In answer to RQ2 (What main challenges did the teachers experience when implementing the virtue education curriculum with different education levels and delivery modes?), the main difficulties teachers had to overcome when implementing the virtue education curriculum depended on whether the lessons were held online or face-to-face. Preschool education teachers delivered their curriculum face-to-face; however, challenges arose with the structure of the materials because, sometimes, they were too complicated and there was insufficient time to complete them fully. The main difficulties for the online lessons, which were mostly taught for the students of basic education (grades 1–9), were also a lack of time and issues related to the students’ and teachers’ digital skills. Thus,

some teachers used the provided activities in less complicated forms or replaced them with similar activities. As was identified in previous studies regarding the lack of digital skills when facing the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic in education (Pešikan et al., 2021; Taber, 2021), in this study, there were difficulties connecting to the online lessons, sharing the video from the PowerPoint presentations, and using the breakout rooms to hold discussions with the students in pairs or groups due to insufficient digital proficiency. In general, the online delivery mode was perceived by the basic education teachers as a serious obstacle to more effective implementation of the activities proposed by the virtue education curriculum. The findings are in line with recent studies regarding the problems caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, including difficulties implementing character education online (Mithhar et al., 2021; Prasetya & Najiyah, 2021; Santi & Widyasari, 2021; Solihati & Agustin, 2020).

Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, which caused a global crisis and transformed various aspects of life, including education (Hofmann et al., 2021; Lobe et al., 2021; Save the Children, 2020; 2021a; 2021b; Taber, 2021), the Latvian teachers found creative and transformative ways of addressing character (virtue) education within face-to-face and online lessons. To overcome the challenges, the majority of preschool teachers and teachers for grades 1–3 used co-modelling (expansion) strategies to provide a higher interactivity level of activities and materials and to enhance correspondence to the children's age. The majority of teachers in grades 4–6 and 7–9 used remodelling (correction) strategies to adapt the activities and materials for online use and to save time. Therefore, in general, the Latvian teachers' online and face-to-face practices were creative and transformative during the COVID-19 pandemic, since it was not just about teaching students but also about identifying and dealing with new needs and challenges to benefit both students and teachers. Whether teaching face-to-face or online, the teachers needed to not only implement the curriculum materials but also address the virtues and values that are crucial for their students' ages. The curriculum provided teachers with not only support but also the opportunity to use their creativity and transformative leadership to adapt lesson plans into their practice, taking learners' needs and views into account, and increasing their engagement and empowerment. The curriculum could be delivered successfully in both modalities – face-to-face and online – since teachers' approaches were creative and transformative to address all the challenges identified. Notably, some lesson plans included interdisciplinarity, which was a significant contribution to facilitating teachers' work within the competence-based approach of the Latvian national curriculum School-2030 (Skola2030, 2017).

Conclusion

Based on the Latvian teachers' evaluation and reflection results obtained during the pilot testing of the virtue education curriculum, the authors found creative aspects in the answers to the open-ended questions about aspects of the curriculum's feasibility. Apart from indicating the challenges while performing the lessons, many teachers shared their ideas about how to improve the curriculum materials and commented on how differently and creatively the curriculum activities were held. Furthermore, by discussing these changes during the focus group discussions, the teachers helped each other to improve the existing lesson plans. The teachers also discussed future improvements to the materials to make them more useful.

COVID-19 presented a unique opportunity to pilot the curriculum online. The outcomes of the study show that a virtue education curriculum can be implemented in both online and face-to-face modes. Furthermore, the teachers' creative and transformative approaches facilitated the successful delivery of the curriculum in both modalities. The results of the research contribute to improving the virtue education curriculum for preschool and basic education students.

To conclude, in a context where character (virtue) education is regaining ground, the results provided in the empirical study have several implications for curriculum developers and in-service teachers. Curriculum developers should integrate a flexible and interdisciplinarity-based approach for elaborating materials for virtue education and analysing and considering the different experiences and perceptions of teachers. In-service teachers should dare to creatively adapt the virtue education curriculum materials according to their students' needs in different local sociocultural contexts. This empirical study is also expected to impact in-service teachers and curriculum developers regarding how they collaborate in curriculum improvement for its effective delivery in both online and face-to-face modes. Studies of innovative approaches to enhance curriculum design and feasibility should be conducted to propose alternative solutions that would enable in-service teachers to participate actively in the curriculum design and redesign process as co-creators.

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Naujų dorinio ugdymo programų, skirtų 5–15 metų mokiniams, išbandymas: didžiausi įgyvendinimo iššūkiai

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Santrauka

Šiame straipsnyje analizuojamos Latvijos mokytojų nuomonės apie pagrindinių dorinio ugdymo programų, skirtų 5–15 metų amžiaus mokiniams, įgyvendinimo galimybes. 2021 m. pavasarį šios programos buvo išbandytos ir įvardyti didžiausi iššūkiai, su kuriais buvo susidurta įgyvendinant dorinį ugdymą COVID-19 pandemijos metu. Bandomajame tyrime savanoriškai dalyvavo 259 mokytojai iš 79 Latvijos švietimo įstaigų. Duomenims rinkti buvo panaudota internetinė anketinė apklausa ir *Focus* grupės diskusija. Kiekybiniam duomenų apdorojimui ir analizei atlikti naudota SPSS programinė įranga. Kokybiniai duomenys apdoroti ir analizuoti naudojant NVivo programinę įrangą, taikant teminę analizę ir kodavimą. Remiantis tyrimo rezultatais, daroma išvada: mokytojai nustatė, kad pamokų planas yra tinkamas visoms ugdymo pakopoms (ikimokyklinis, 1–3, 4–6 ir 7–9 klasės) ir mokymosi būdams (kontaktiniam ir/arba nuotoliniam). Ikimokyklinio ugdymo mokytojai kontaktiniu būdu išbandė mokymo programą, tačiau kartais medžiagos struktūra buvo per daug sudėtinga ir mokytojams pritrūkdavo laiko viską iki galo įvykdyti. Pagrindiniai nuotolinių pamokų, kurios buvo skirtos pagrindinio ugdymo mokiniams, sunkumai buvo laiko trūkumas ir problemos, susijusios su mokinių ir mokytojų skaitmeniniais įgūdžiais. Darytina išvada, kad mokymo programa gali būti sėkmingai vykdoma abiem būdais – kontaktiniu ir nuotoliniu, nes kūrybiškas ir besikeičiantis mokytojų požiūris sudaro galimybę išspręsti visus jiems iškilusius iššūkius.

Esminiai žodžiai: COVID-19, mokymosi būdas, kontaktinis mokymasis ir mokymas, įvykdymo galimybė, nuotolinis mokymas ir mokymasis, bandomasis tyrimas, dorinio ugdymo programa.

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