

# **The Role of Parents during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Croatia**

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## **Abstract**

Like many other areas, the educational system is challenging during the time of pandemic of the coronavirus. In the first half of the 2020 year, many schools had online lessons. The same situation was in Croatia, where we had online teaching from March to May in all elementary schools. Thus, the educational system started with fast-changing in terms of online teaching and learning methods. Distance learning has brought many families into specific situations because the help is normally provided to students by the teacher; in this situation, the parent had to do it. Because of that, parents were in a situation where they had to work online or “in vivo” and help their children learn new content. This was especially difficult for parents with a slightly lower level of education, parents who spent much time away from home at work, and especially for parents whose livelihoods called into question their lives, so in addition to organisational, some other socio-economic and emotional difficulties. Thus, this paper aims to research parents’ attitudes about distance learning and their role in these situations during the school year 2020/2021. As we expected, teachers wanted more cooperation with parents and parents wanted more understanding from teachers and not so many exercises in a short time.

**Keywords:** *Attitudes, Croatian Educational System, Distance Learning, Role of Parents*

## **Introduction**

The beginning of 2020 was marked by the global spread of the SARS-COV2 virus identified at the end of 2019 in China. The world being a “global village”, the virus spread rapidly and already by March 2020 it was detected in almost all member states of the European Union. The emergence of the virus launched a series of changes in the global economy, and the Republic of Croatia was one of the countries in March that resorted to border closures and terminating all activities that could have been terminated at that point.

The kindergartens were closed, while the primary and secondary schools switched to teaching at a distance. It occurred rather quickly so all the teaching process participants were left with no other option but to adjust themselves to the “new normal” and try to utilise their experience so classes could be carried out as successfully as possible. Since the students were

required to use their personal computer and internet access, the parents provided a great amount of support to their participation in distance learning, not only as technical support but also as psychological and educational. The students were supposed to go through many lessons, usually within a limited time frame, and the parents would assume the teacher's role to an extent and help them with mastering all the demanding subject matter, often even solving math problems or writing homework. At that moment, the parents found themselves in a unique place in the teaching process, and they were given a role that was sometimes even frustrating because they were not feeling entirely competent to help their children, while at the same time doing their chores, so many were quite often short of time. Since the situation was in many aspects, specific and unpredictable, the psychological and social pressure and the media pressure, greatly influenced the people's lives. Mostly family life, which we will try to demonstrate through the prism of studying the parents' attitudes towards distance learning.

### **Theoretical framework: The role of parent in education**

Both school and the parents are the two pillars that a child can count upon during their elementary school education. Their cooperation has always been necessary and expected. The law further defines cooperation between parents and schools on Education and Upbringing and the school statutes. Parents participate in the school's bodies and represent the parents of the class attended by their child in the Parents' Council, while a representative of the Parents' Council is as well one of the school's governing members body, the School Board. The most important and concrete cooperation takes place through the reciprocal relation of parent-student-teacher (homeroom teacher/class master)-school—the student being the most important link in that chain. The cooperation of parents, teachers, and the school aims to provide students with quality education and upbringing recognised in shared values. Parents and the school can either cooperate or be partners. In his paper, Tokić (2020) refers to Kolakov's definition of partnership and the definition of cooperation that we encounter in Maleš. He points out that the terms cooperation and partnership, which we encounter in the literature, differ significantly. Partnership implies a greater degree of parental involvement and their personal, active involvement in school activities. Cooperation is defined as a social process that incorporates a range of activities and undertakings of both teachers and parents. Their goal is the highest possible quality, safest, and the most successful student development (according to Tokic 2020). Cooperation is also a process of mutual information sharing, counselling, learning, discussing, and socialising to share responsibility for children's development in the family and the school. From all the aforementioned follows, the cooperation goal is the child's welfare (Tokic, 2020). Parents and the school exist in a cooperative relationship. (Tokic, 2020)

The school year 2019/2020 in the Republic of Croatia required constant cooperation between parents and the school. It began with a teacher's strike in the first semester (October to December 2019), and in the second semester the world, and thus the school system, faced a new, great challenge: COVID-19 virus. Lectures have moved into students' homes, and parents have taken over a part of the role that the teacher had played in the school until then, while at the same time maintaining the role they have daily: providing the child with conditions for work and education. Parents are obliged under the law to send their children to school. In this particular case, school meant working from home and fulfilling all school

obligations in distance learning and daily participation in class. The Ministry of Science and Education in its recommendation on the organisation of the students working day during remote learning and education, stresses that *Teaching over distance is a challenge for teachers and students, but also the entire family because the process of teaching and learning takes place at home and it is necessary to provide certain preconditions to learn, but also to assess how much time you actually for learning.* To be successful in class, it was essential to encourage students to have a well-organised working day and provide them with devices on which they can follow lectures and have internet access. Some students received their devices from the Ministry of Science and Education (5th and 6th-grade students and extremely low socio-economic status). Other parents had to provide their children with technical conditions for attending classes. It is also important to emphasise that families often have more than one child attending school. The parents' task was also to help students in learning and following their lessons while at the same time providing aid with writing their homework. Teachers, especially homeroom teachers/class masters, have helped parents guide the children, but the number of students is just not independent enough and seeks constant learning support. That support was the parents.

Škutor (2014) refers to research that points out that structural problems related to the support of children by their parents mainly consist of: lack of role models in the family, inadequate information on the content of curricula, parental knowledge and competencies required to help children learn, as well as a stimulating environment and material resources. As the distance learning was implemented the parents of students in the Republic of Croatia met with all of the above. The parent-school relationship became a partnership. Together with teachers and professional associates, parents have become part of the educational process and are currently actively involved in all its parts. They faced many challenges, and they did not have the necessary education or know-how for them. In this paper, we will analyse parents' attitudes and try to show some of the challenges that they faced and what proved to be the biggest difficulties for them.

### **Problem areas**

This research aims to research parents' attitudes during the pandemic situation in the school year 2020/2021 on the quality of the organisation of distance learning. In accordance with the fundamental goal, the following problems were posed:

- 1) Examine the assessment of the time students spent in distance learning concerning the subject.
- 2) Compare contact and online teaching concerning the workload of students from a parental perspective.
- 3) Examine the independence of students in online teaching.
- 4) Examine parental competencies with digital technology and satisfaction with the organisation of online teaching.

In accordance with the fundamental goal and problems of the research, the following hypotheses were set:

H1 - it is expected that students spend most of their time being taught subjects from the STEAM area, as this is an area that most students find challenging to follow, and likewise, subjects in which the content is quite extensive, such as History, Geography, Biology.

H2 - It is expected that distance learning is more demanding for students because they cannot communicate everything with the teacher; they can receive content presented differently, which can sometimes confuse. They do not have time to ask questions and solve a larger number of tasks and are therefore partially “left to themselves” or parents.

H3 - Students are expected to be relatively independent in online teaching because they know the principles of operating in most systems chosen by their school and over time they can anticipate ways of the lesson explaining with respect to the subject and the teacher.

H4 - Parents are expected to have good digital competencies because they are younger generations, i.e. net-generations, but some feel frustrated because they cannot fully help their children. Correspondingly, some parents believe that distance learning could be better organised, with as many as possible video lessons, interesting examples, and much more communication between teachers and students and their parents.

### **Methodological research objectives**

The research included 339 parents of students from the first to the eighth grade of the DragutinDomjanić Elementary School in Sveti Ivan Zelina and an equal number of students from all grades. The research was done in the form of an online questionnaire in google forms. Parents were offered nine open-ended and closed-ended questions in which they had to assess how much time their child spent in a particular subject daily. They also had to assess their children’s workload in distance learning and compare contact teaching in a school with those over distance. Moreover, parents assessed their children’s independence in distance learning and their attitude towards the same. Finally, they had to assess the quality of organisation in distance learning and their competences in digital technologies to assess how much parents were able to help their children. Lastly, they were asked to give their comment in which they could describe their personal experience.

### **Results**

The first aim of the research was to research the assessment of the time students spent in distance learning with respect to a subject. 63.1% of parents believe that their child spent 30-60 minutes a day in Croatian language classes, and approximately the same amount of time was spent by most students in English language and mathematics. Equally, most parents find that their children spend 30 to 60 minutes a day attending classes of biology, chemistry, and physics. Also, according to their parents, students spent approximately 30 to 60 minutes in the classes of geography, history, and technical culture. Students spent less than half an hour a day in subjects as fine arts, music culture, and physical and health culture, as well as in electives. Although it is expected that students will spend more time in subjects from the STEAM area, this thesis has not been confirmed. Namely, as the parents estimated, students generally spent 30 to 60 minutes working on a subject that they had by schedule or on a subject in which they had a verbal examination on a given day. The subjects from the art field, electives and physical and health culture, given these subjects’ position in this type of teaching, have almost been neglected.

The second goal of the research was to compare contact and online teaching concerning students’ workload from a parental perspective. While comparing students’ independence in subjects concerning contact and digital teaching, it was found that there is no significant

difference, or in other words, parents believe that their children are equally burdened in online teaching as in contact teaching. It was also shown that online teaching for students is as difficult, i.e. easy, as contact, in other words, that there is no significant difference, although a significant difference is expected.

The third goal of the research was to examine the independence of students in online teaching. In the Croatian language, English language, German language, Mathematics and Nature and society, the students showed somewhat less independence and the need for one parent to help them master the material. In the other indicated subjects, the students showed a bit more independence in their work, and in some situations, they needed someone to help them, but this was not as often. This can confirm the third hypothesis.

The fourth goal was to examine parental competencies in digital technology and satisfaction with online classes' organisation. First of all, 38% of parents thought their child is satisfied with online teaching, while 34% believed that they were not satisfied. 27% of respondents could not decide whether they are satisfied or not. Furthermore, 64% of students are completely satisfied with the organisation of distance learning, while 14% are not satisfied at all. Only 12% of parents have had difficulty with digital content, while the rest are considered quite competent. In the description of personal experience with their child in tracking online classes, parents, as expected, give different answers. Some of them, especially parents of children in lower grades, are satisfied with distance learning and communication with teachers, and most believe that children are sufficiently burdened, but not overburdened. The greater concern is seen in the parents of children in subject teaching who have to focus on more tasks, more content and materials of which some parents feel are not adequately made and presented, or they believe that the teacher should fully control this part of the work while they should only be support and helpers. Still, parents of some less independent children have to take on much work, and due to the incapability to reconcile the demands of their work and the newly increased effort around helping the child learn, they tend to feel nervous and powerless. A particular problem is manifested with single-parent families, i.e., single parents whose children are sometimes "left to themselves" if the parent is out of the home for most of the day. During that time, children take advantage of digital technology and use it for entertainment, thus reducing learning and working in online teaching. Parents' concerns increase with students' age, and parents of fifth-graders who have just moved to a new work system with many more subjects than the previous schooling had greater difficulties. Taking all of the above into consideration, it can be concluded that the fourth hypothesis is accepted because parents do possess digital competencies, or at least most of them, which allow them to monitor and support the child in online teaching. However, due to lack of time, they often feel frustrated, powerless, and unable to help their child master the content of the subjects. While they also believe that teachers could better solve this problem by improving communication with students and parents and preparing various presentations and videos.

*Table 1.* Written testimonies of parents

*Answer 1*

We Are Very Pleased with The Way Distance Learning Is Conducted. Teachers Are Trying Very Hard to Explain the New Material, Step by Step, How To Solve All The Assigned Tasks, As Well In The Form Of

Video And Presentation. So, My First-Grader Has No Problem Adopting New Material. E.G. We Do A New Unit Together, And Then He Alone Successfully Solves His Homework. Nothing but Praises and Just Keep It Up! Thank You to All the Teachers And The Principal For Their Effort!

**Answer 2**

Too Many Assignments (They Didn't Have This Many While They Were Going To School), Everything Needs To Be Further Explained, And Sometimes Even We The Parents Don't Know How To Explain It Because We Don't Understand The Assignment.

**Answer 3**

My Child Is Happy And Content And Relaxed. Communication With Teachers Is Excellent And She Receives Feedback For Each Task. Bravo! All Praise For This Kind Of Organization And For The Effort That Everyone Puts Into Ensuring That Classes Are Conducted Smoothly, Almost Like In School.

**Answer 4**

I Am Satisfied With The Way Everything Works, But I Must Mention That The Parent Is Central For Successfully Solving Assignments For 2nd-Grade Children. I Personally Review The Tasks Every Day And I Also Check If The Child Has Tagged Each Task With A "Like" And I Finally Check If He Has Painted All The Tasks And Set Them On Edmodo. The Child Solves The Tasks Independently, But The Parent Has To Participate In Technical Matters For Now. I Think That Children Are Not Overloaded With The Amount Of Tasks And That They Have Enough Time For Free Activities.

**Answer 5**

My Child Prefers To Go To School Because It Is Usually Harder For Him To Express Himself By Writing And He Is Better At Expressing Himself Orally. For Now, He Does All The Tasks On His Own, But I See That He Is Not Doing Very Well, It's All Done Fast And With Minimal Effort, And He Doesn't Want My Help. He Is Also Very Sensitive, Especially Now In Puberty, So Every Criticism And Admonition Introduces Some Tensions... Because I Have To Work In These Difficult Times And Go To My Workplace To Work I Do Not Get To Spend Enough Time With Him, And As I Am Divorced And We Live Alone, Things Get Worse Because At Home There Is No One To Monitor And Warn Him, So When I Am At Work He Spends Most Of His Time Playing Games, And He Only Does His Homework Quickly, So I'm Very Worried About His Results As 8th Grade Comes To Completion.

**Answer 6**

I Think That Children Are Overburdened, Specifically, At Their Age, It Is Impossible To "Ask" From Them Such Self-Discipline To Do Everything Themselves 100% (They Are Not Adults, They Are Children), And Especially In The Amount Of Tasks And Information They Are Currently Given. They Are Asked To Master Subjects Such As Physics, Chemistry, Mathematics ... Which I Think Is Impossible In This Situation Because They Have No One To Turn To, Who Could Clarify The Assignments From The Above Subjects. At The Same Time, A Big Problem Is That Maybe Not Everyone Has A Computer At Home, And Some Tasks Can't Even Be Done On Shared Tablets. Children Literally Spend The Whole Day In Distance Learning Because The Classes Are Too Extensive And Homework Is Too Difficult For Some Subjects To Be Done Without The Teacher's Instructions, And Unfortunately Their Parents Cannot Help Them In Some Subjects, Especially If They Work.

**Answer 7**

More Teacher Engagement Is Necessary (Videos, Messages) So To They At Least Try To Explain The New Material. And Not Just Send A Message Stating, "I Don't Know How To Help You". More Investment Is Needed In Teachers' Digital Literacy.

**Answer 8**

The Online School Is Well Organised But My Child Needs Further Elaboration, He Does Not Understand Enough About The Program Itself, And We Parents Both Work And We Often Do Not Have Time To Sit With Him Regularly Nor Can We Explain Subjects Well Enough To Him As His Teachers Could. I Don't Know How Much They Will Really Learn And How Much Knowledge Will They Gain This Year.

## Discussion

While assessing distance learning in the questionnaire, in closed-ended questions, results obtained show how it was successfully organised, well-run, that parents had feedback, and

that students were not overburdened. The open-ended question, in which parents further clarify their views, complements the view of the situations in which parents and students found themselves. The time spent in distance learning (up to 6 hours) on average corresponds to the time they spend every day in regular classes; hence the time spent on schooling and learning was shortened. Usually, when students attend regular classes, the time they spend in their school day is divided into time spent travelling to school, school, returning home, writing homework, and learning at home. Distance learning shortened this and left the possibility of additional free time.

Furthermore, the research showed how parents believe that children are equally burdened in distance learning and contact teaching and that there is no significant difference in the results obtained. In some cases, they were less independent, and unexpectedly these were not subjects from the STEAM area. This research opens the possibility of another research that would examine whether they were overburdened and not independent in some subjects due to the amount and/or difficulty of the teaching content, misunderstanding of the content being thought, the teacher's way of working, or something entirely else. The question of how many parents can help the child in the adoption of materials from the STEAM subject area (Physics, Chemistry, Biology) also remains open.

Thanks to the digital competencies of the parents, the students managed well in the online environment. On March 11, 2020, the Ministry of Science and Education issued *Guidelines for primary and secondary schools regarding distance learning organisation with the help of information and communication technologies*. It is emphasised that communication channels must be organised in schools. Virtual classrooms are organised for grade-school students, and for the elementary school, it is suggested that homeroom teachers, if they have not done so yet, connect parents to a virtual group through appropriate communication channels (Viber, WhatsApp, Facebook, e-mail, phone...). In its guidelines, the Ministry refers to the direct cooperation of parents and elementary school teachers. Students' greater independence in grade school is expected, and their guidance is left to homeroom teachers and subject teachers. The research results showed that the parents of elementary school students are very satisfied with the communication with their children's homeroom teachers/class masters and that the children are not overburdened. Parents of grade school students, who had less direct communication with teachers, encountered greater difficulties and uncertainties. The question arises as to whether these difficulties arise from the student's lack of independence, immaturity and parental care for the child, or the result of methodically poorly designed teaching units, as stated by the parents in the questionnaire. While emphasising that teachers should be the ones who control and lead the teaching process and that they should be the support and helpers, parents, furthermore emphasise the need for personal safety and guidance. Therefore, a question arises on how many parents think they can help their child-student in learning or comprehend teaching material and from which subjects especially.

Parents gave their answers based on subjective impression, communication with other parents, communication with homeroom teachers/teachers/school, and conditions imbued with the fear of illness, fear of earthquakes, and concern for existence. In similar conditions, distance learning had to be done by teachers, who had to cope with a completely new work environment, learn new (digital) skills for which no one prepared them, and at the same time

take care of the safety and existence of their own families. The Covid-19 pandemic's time opens new perspectives on the education system and participants' relationship within that system. Questions opened up, which could lead to new research. This particular research highlighted teachers' importance as the most imperative link that guides and directs the teaching process. By choosing their methodological procedures and approaches, the student sees continuous progress in adopting learning outcomes. Parents, professional associates, and principals can be helpers, but there is no good and quality education without good communication between the student and the teacher.

Parents should be involved in their child's education, monitor their progress, and monitor how the child learns to be responsible and independent, but are not responsible for the learning process itself and methodological approaches that lead to successful adoption of learning outcomes in a specific subject. During the distance learning classes, the parents and the school worked together and overcame the shortcomings that made it difficult to organise work. However, they all agree on one thing: if offered again, distance learning is the last option that they would choose. The school (in-school teaching) is a place where children should learn, and a teacher is the only one who has the necessary competencies that can provide their children with a good and quality education. Because of continuing these pandemic situations, we think that parents have to take main role in children's school life because we do not have an alternative, and parents can help keep the educational system and children's mental health in a good mood.

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