

Article

Communion, Care and Leadership in Computer-Mediated Learning During the Early Stage of COVID-19

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Abstract. This qualitative inquiry explores how, during the early stage of the COVID-19 pandemic in Lithuania (European Union), the stakeholders in education system – university teachers, general education teachers, students and children’s parents – coped with the encountered challenge and what was important to them under changed conditions. This paper uses a communication management objective to describe how participants in the education system respond to the emerging distance learning situation and its challenges. The phenomenographic research approach was chosen to carry out the qualitative study. The 37 interviews from higher education teachers, university students, school teachers and parents of minor school-aged children were conducted during the early stage of COVID-19 quarantine. The research allows concluding that after a successful transition to distance learning the dimensions of communion and supportive collaboration acquired importance among stakeholders in education. Starting new activities, a need for communion and mobilization for joint activities under the crisis situation emerged. The research showed that the adaptation period was necessary at the beginning of the new activity. Competent leadership was expected from the teacher also advance preparation of all the actors in education process was needed. The data do offer a window into the dynamics of online teaching in crisis situation and experiences in new activity that are key to success.

Keywords: technology-mediated learning, communion, communication, supportive collaboration, teacher-student communication, pandemic.

1. Introduction

In the face of coronavirus pandemic, all the world has been coping with partial or full social isolation. Education system has been affected substantially, online teaching and learning have become the "new normal" [1]. Distance education requires exceptional arrangements, abilities and IT skills in addition to smart devices and applications that enable the videoconferencing communication [2]. Distance learning for the majority of stakeholders in the education system was an absolutely new experience. Even experienced university teachers or school teachers encountered challenges, whereas parents got additional load. The change caused by the pandemic affected and impaired the systems and processes that universities and school leaders were used to in order to lead and manage organisational performance, and it created barriers to existing mechanisms for providing moral, social, personal and professional support and motivation to their staff [3]. There is much agreement among communication and leadership scholars and practitioners that crises disrupt and derail organizational practices, threaten individual and institutional reputations, and require rapid

responses [4]. Having faced the crisis caused by the pandemic, the education system reacted and introduced measures to ensure its functioning rather quickly. However, the quarantine highlighted the weak sides of education and opened up new possibilities.

In this article, the researchers aimed to analyse the reflections of actors in education system on online learning in the very beginning of the Covid19 pandemic approaching a rapid transition to distance teaching as a new activity to all stakeholders in education: university teachers, teachers, students and parents of minor school-aged children. The lockdown caused by the Covid19 pandemic is seen as a crisis situation following the theory of C. L. Estes (1983) [5], who states that “crises are socially constructed as a consequence of social perception and definition; that is, a crisis may be said to exist if it is perceived to exist. This perspective is echoed by M. Voss and D.F. Lorenz (2016) in their description of a constructivist understanding of crisis as one that ‘privileges not the objective threat but rather stakeholders’ perception of the situation as a crisis [6]. I. I. Mitroff (2004) and W. T. Coombs (2002) indicate that internal and external stakeholder perceptions are critical during crisis situations [7; 8]. Crises are more accessible to intervention at their peak and may be resolved in adaptive or maladaptive ways [9]. The researchers rely on the assumption that elements that help to focus and concentrate in the beginning of crisis situation are among the most important milestones while creating successful activities. The global health crisis was used as a catalytic moment to rethink the students, teachers, parent’s perception of online learning in a changed situation.

2. Background

Prior to the pandemic-caused quarantine higher education schools in Lithuania, an EU member country, just like the ones all over the world, were implementing distance teaching but it was a part of usual teaching. It is natural that transition to full online teaching created a big number of challenges in all educational institutions: school and university teachers, students and pupils learned to master new technology-mediated tools and environments, thought over assignments and tests and had to get used to new work routine. Reduction of interaction in learning, actors in education system lived through the crisis situation and solved the problem related to shortage of social relations in their own way.

Living in the background of constant educational reforms, university and school teachers had encountered a number of challenges before the pandemic hit. The necessity to use new technologies, the gap between the literacy of teachers and students in media and technologies as well as differences in generation communication introduced certain insecurity among teachers. The mistrust of society in higher education was also among these challenges [10], including increased scrutiny from a wide array of internal and external audiences [11], a concerning and uncertain financial outlook [12], and ongoing issues related to access, affordability, and adequate job preparation for students [4].

Teaching is an emotionally challenging profession, sometimes resulting in high levels of teacher stress, burnout, and attrition. Next to administrative workload [13; 14], a problematic teacher–student relationship is a well-known contributor to negative emotions, decreased work engagement, and increased emotional exhaustion [15; 16; 17]. The new activity introduced because of pandemic even enhanced this situation. Communication at a distance became a challenge to teachers and pupils, when interpersonal communication, which served as basis for relation, decreased [18]. A crucial role of teacher-student relationships in the quality of teaching and learning has been demonstrated in many studies. The results showed teacher-student relationships to be associated with student cognitive learning outcomes and motivation [19; 20; 21], and with teacher well-being [15; 22].

Although the research shows that adaptation to distant work from home is quite easy and fast [23], the researchers point out some disadvantages, such as the lack of coaching, the loss of social relationships, risk that the person will not be able to disconnect from work, or during their rest and leisure time, because, being online, they can be contacted at any time [24]. These factors have influence on the quality of online teaching and continuance satisfaction. Another aspect that is relevant to education community embraces the quality of distance learning. The use of online learning alone can be insufficient to meet the needs of faculty members and students [1]. Students have mixed feelings about whether online learning can nurture the knowledge and skills necessary

for their career goals [25]. Smoyer et al., (2020) states that interactive technologies may increase students' engagement and stimulate the human interaction that is so essential to student learning and practice [18].

The sudden shift from classroom-based to remote learning had a significant effect not only on teachers and students but also on parents, requiring swift adaptation to the features of the digital platforms and thrust upon them. Studies report successful cases of parents' involvement in distance learning and child support [3]. However, it is a new experience and responsibility for parents, therefore, their views on this new activity are important in planning the next steps. The process is a complicated practice that needs considerable efforts of all stakeholders to successful engagement for achieving the educational objectives. This necessitates a well-qualified lecturer who can cope with this new method perfectly, well-motivated and skilled students who can also deal with this new method right [26] and positive attitude of parents.

Therefore, it was relevant to identify how university teachers, students, school teachers and children's parents felt, when in the crisis situation they had to change their usual routine, to teach and learn without such key components of teaching, i.e. face-to-face contact with learners, instant reflection and colleague community. The research on how actors in education system perceive/live through the situation of distance learning in the beginning of lockdown, will allow making insights not only into the success of transition to distance learning but also foreseeing what is important for research stakeholders in the beginning of new activity and crisis situation. The research can be of practical use to education leaders at all levels. Individuals with formal and informal leadership responsibilities have the ability to shape the conditions through which others experience a situation – and therefore may influence others to experience and treat specific moments and events as crises [27].

Although the COVID-19 pandemic is a global issue, the response needs to be local [28], including our interactions with others and the systems that bind us [29]. Therefore, this small-scale research on the attitude of actors in education in a small EU country can supplement the scientific discourse seeking to prepare for crisis situations and to recover after them.

2. Materials and Methods

The first quarantine due to the Covid19 pandemic in Lithuania was announced 14 March 2020. Then the whole education system had to unexpectedly start distance learning. Higher and general education schools did not implement the process of teaching for two weeks and used this period for preparation to it. Since the actors in education system had accumulated different experience in distance work or did not have any, this transition period was critical and highlighted the aspects that were crucial to a person. The participants of different preparation and with different attitudes entered online teaching/learning. Therefore, it was decided to carry out a quick and general overview of the attitude of stakeholders in education system towards the changed situation. The goal of the research was to disclose the attitude of actors in education (university teachers, university students, school teachers and children's parents) towards distance teaching-learning in the beginning of quarantine due to the pandemic.

The research question: What is most important while organising distance studies during the isolation period due to the pandemic?

The research design. The phenomenographic research approach was chosen to carry out the study. The research was carried out at the beginning of the quarantine due to the COVID-19 pandemic, i.e. from 3 to 16 April 2020, soon after online teaching was introduced. The 36 interviews ranged from 15 to 43 min, with an average time of approximately 24 min, resulting in more than 900 min of data. The research data were recorded with the consent of informants. The interviews were conducted and recorded via phone. The interviews were conducted until the researchers reached a point of saturation for the study overall [30]. The purposive sampling was applied choosing participants - stakeholders in education system with different expertise in distance learning, of different age, gender and professional experience, stakeholders [31]. Such a sampling provided the researchers with a possibility of selecting meaningful cases and collecting more extensive data [32].

The purposeful sampling during the phenomenographic research allows revealing a diversity of investigated experiences [33; 34]. The research sample included nine higher education teachers (aged 29-59 years), ten university students (aged 18-23), eight school teachers (aged 36-57), nine parents of minor school aged children (aged 32-53), who helped their children to learn online during the lockdown. The research participants were assigned codes: university teacher 1 – UT1, university teacher 2 – UT2, etc., student 1 – S1, student 2 – S2, etc., school teacher 1 – ST1, school teacher 2 – ST2, etc., parent 1 – P1, parent 2 – P2, etc.

The researchers in this article analyse how actors in education perceive the very phenomenon of online learning during the pandemic-caused quarantine, when they had to engage in a new activity very quickly. The question “What is most important while organising distance studies during the isolation period due to the pandemic?” was asked of all the informant groups. Clarifying questions were asked during the interview, and if necessary, the informants were asked to clarify what they meant.

The phenomenographic research method was used to process the data. Phenomenography investigates the qualitatively different ways in which people experience phenomena. The research goal is not to generalise experiences but to present a variety of aspects that characterise experience in distance teaching/learning [35; 36]. The results of phenomenographic research allowed identifying and characterising individual and subjective peculiarities and ways of perceiving the experienced phenomenon, to show their interrelations and to disclose the relation of an individual with the surrounding world [37; 38]. Phenomenography is frequently applied investigating the teacher-student attitude towards learning [39; 40]. The data were analysed following 7 steps: 1) familiarization (the text is read, content is learnt, technical mistakes are eliminated), 2) compilation (the most significant elements in the responses of every informant are identified), 3) reduction (the essence of every longer response or dialogue is searched for), 4) grouping (responses are grouped according to categories), 5) preliminary comparison of categories (boundaries among categories are established), 6) naming (categories are named), 7) contrastive comparison (categories are compared, their differences are highlighted) [41]. The coder reliability check, when two researchers were independently coding the transcribed texts of all the interviews and comparing the received categories with each other, was conducted. The dialogic reliability check was done through researchers’ discussions [42].

Ethical issues were carefully considered and addressed. To ensure that all respondents felt comfortable in this sensitive lockdown time all interviews were anonymous and voluntary. The whole process met the requirements of the General Data Protection Requirements (GDPR).

3. Results

The analysis of research data allowed distinguishing 7 categories that make up a hierarchically structured space of results. The identified categories revealed what was important to the actors in education system of Lithuania (university teachers, university students, school teachers, parents of minor students) in the beginning of organising distance teaching/learning (Table 1). In the in-depth interviews the actors in education system, who unexpectedly found themselves in the situations when distance learning became inevitable, disclosed the aspects of organising the process of distance learning of importance to them and did not single out one as the most important.

Need of time for adaptation. Lithuanian higher and general education schools introduced distance teaching approximately two weeks after the start of quarantine. Higher education and school teachers noticed that in the beginning of new activity, especially if little time was allocated to adaptation, they lacked self-confidence. Actors in education system linked the period of preparation with adaptation, which was meant for psychological and professional preparation for the new activity: *“well, the most important thing probably is good preparation of teacher <...> I think that the decision to give a two-week period for students as well as teachers to prepare was good. Preparation is very important because when 8 years ago I had to start to teach online, it was like jumping into the water, into the cold sea, when you had to clarify how to teach. The employees of distance education centre helped me then but now there are a lot of ways to get help,*

recommendations and various information. When I started teaching, there were fewer possibilities, or I wasn't able to find them. So, the support to the teacher is important" (UT 4). The better communication was ensured, the faster was mobilisation of stakeholders in education for distance work. In the beginning, they all lacked specific information and it was not clear what to do. Even if information for the new activity was presented in a concentrated manner and in a familiar location, emotional disposition in the state of discomfort impeded perception and assimilation of information. Although the workload of participants in education increased, their attention was already focused on functioning in the new environment: "we worked without counting the working hours. The workload was enormously large. Perhaps we did not even sleep for two weeks" (ST 3). According to the actors in education, the new activity had to be well thought over, weighted and planned to enable moving to the comfort zone: "the first week was also very difficult to us and we had to meet face challenges. The children as well. Perhaps two or three more weeks will pass, we will work this way, then everything will settle down and everything will be at its own pace. At a new but known and understandable pace. <...> we'll get back to normal life" (P 5). Transition to the comfort state was related to mutual agreements, coordination of activities, deadlines and others: "as long as we agreed on video lessons, we had disagreements. Indeed, we have to make joint decisions" (ST 3). The informants searched not only for information but also for communion.

Need for communion. In the beginning of new, unfamiliar activity that was introduced during the crisis, the participants in the research distinguished the importance of human communication and relationship to each other: "just communion. It is not without reason that coherence and sustainable communities are much more discussed. This aspect is of utmost significance in this situation in particular. The more in common we have with our colleagues, relatives, the more we share experience, events with them" (UT 7). A simple human relationship is enriched by benevolence towards each other and tolerance: "benevolence towards students" (UT 4); "all we need is goodwill, understanding" (UT 7).

Distance communication provided necessary information but hindered maintenance of interpersonal relationship: "it is difficult for teachers to convey information in a distant way, when they can't speak with their students live" (S 6). The actors in Lithuanian education stated that they searched for elements of maintaining relationship such as seeing the face on the screen, hearing of voice, talking informally and others: "human contact is necessary, even if it is via screen" (UT 2); "maintenance of warm relations, speaking to pupils" (P 9); "I always ask them how they are doing" (UT 7); "it is important to keep the contact. For example, I lead a folk ensemble. Sometimes we contact and communicate via Zoom program. Not to do or complete something but just to communicate, to hear and to maintain relations" (ST 6); "in the morning I make a Messenger call to them and I say "Good morning, the lecture has started". And they start a lecture with joy. I act as a school bell. And I enjoy this when I see these bubbles on the computer clink, clink, clink. Not all the girls hear my call at once and when they join us the whole group welcome "hellooooo...", "hello, teacher", - we are all together again. This is a sense of unity. We are together. And this is not such a strict discipline. It is necessary to maintain this human approach. It is necessary to introduce certain playfulness, immediacy to prevent people from feeling imprisoned. And then you have to enter them into the work rhythm" (UT 1); "the teacher has to show to the students that s/he accepts their questions in any form, even virtually, that the teacher is ready to help. It is necessary to encourage them to write letters because not all the students have bravery to do that. On the other hand, students have to ask questions, to show initiative that these lectures are important to them" (S 10). In the beginning of new activity evidence was awaited that we are important to each other as well as necessary. Without the proof of communion, the actors in education system may get disappointed, dissatisfied or even experience a sense of pointlessness: "one simple thing is required from students, i.e. to switch on camera. When I don't see what they are doing, I don't understand what I'm doing. They may be drinking coffee or doing something else instead of taking part in the lecture. Sometimes you ask and there is no answer. This means he or she is not at computer any more... But I can't require such a thing so it is what it is" (UT 6); "if nobody connects, you can plan anything, nothing happens" (UT 8).

Putting the human relation first creates comfortable environment for improvement when problems disappear acting together. Performing in an unfamiliar situation a tendency to decrease requirements to others and to increase requirements for themselves is observed. Concentration on own behaviour boosts benevolence towards others: "and I really didn't hear any remarks or complains" (UT 7); "everything in my college is all right. We are understood. There's nothing wrong there <...> teachers

cope with everything" (S 2); "teachers are doing well, we get all the information" (S 6); "teachers have to want to learn technologies, if there are any difficulties <...> In my situation teachers encounter this situation anew but they cope with this well" (S 1); "students are very smart people. Perhaps you can ask them for a piece of advice, they will teach you and will help you" (UT 7). The teachers in the new activity strive for proactiveness, participation, engagement of learners believing that only action, moving forward facilitates learning; "students have to connect and to be ready to work. All the rest can be done collectively <...>. Probably, their participation is the most important" (UT 8). To attain this, they even tend to lower the requirements. Activity rather than result is important: "while learning it is important not to impose too strict requirements <...> deadlines should be approached in a more flexible manner and requirements should be lowered" (ST 6); "teachers tend to help and to compromise in certain situations, to ease situations <...>. Among colleagues as well as among students the most important thing is to reduce ambitions, to understand that this is not a usual and ordinary situation" (UT 7).

Communion, unity and perception of yourself as a community member come through communication. Benevolence towards each other helps to feel necessary, important and this enhances initiative even in a new activity. An unfamiliar activity encourages transition from individuality to a sense of community and simultaneously to continuous communication. This calls for a positive attitude.

Table 1. Significant aspects of distance learning, which were disclosed by the stakeholders in the Lithuanian system of education in the beginning of the quarantine due to the Covid-19 pandemic (prepared by the authors following the methodology by Kinnunen et al., 2007)

Category	How prerequisites for successful distance teaching/learning are perceived	The research focus	The dominating aspect	Ability of education participants to perceive the importance of every element of distance teaching/learning
Time for adaptation	Influence of fact, character and way of information (non)presentation on person's disposition to act	How does appropriate communication during adaptation period impact further development of new activity?	Actors in the education system	
Communion	Impact of state of communion	How is communion created, which turns into a common goal-oriented activity?	Actors in the education system	
Positive attitudes	Influence of personal disposition and behaviour on development of distance teaching/learning	How do personal attitudes of the actors in education influence development of new activities?	Actors in the education system	
Supportive collaboration	Circulation of information creates atmosphere of collaboration, provides support	What kind of collaboration among actors in education encourages development of new activity?	Actors in the education system	
Teacher as a professional leader in own field	Behaviour of the learner is formed when the teacher acts	How do teacher's professional experience and leadership influence organisation and success of distance teaching/learning?	The teacher and the learner	
Discipline, self-control	Personal discipline, which has formed through personal experience, based on individuality, concept and style of life	How internal and external discipline is related to success of distance teaching/learning?	Actors in the education system	
Technical issues	Influence of hardware and software	How technical environment is linked to success of distance teaching/learning?	Actors in the education system	

Need for positive attitudes. The research participants link self-activation with internal attitudes: *“the most important thing is not to remain indifferent”* (S 5); *“children should be interested”* (P 6); *“an appropriate attitude, no fear of change or technologies”* (UT 3); *“a wish to improve, a wish to cope with challenges”* (UT 4); *“people’s wish to learn”* (S 1); *“efforts of teachers and students themselves, their attitudes to lectures. Since this is a new thing to everybody, we have to present new ideas how to really make this thing better”* (S 3). After the adaptation period was over, confusion reduced, and the importance of individual internal attitudes became evident. The efforts that are necessary for any activity were indicated as important: *“person’s will”* (UT 1) and motivation for a specific activity: *“the most important thing is that a student wants to study and to be active, <...> a wish is all what is needed”* (UT 2); *“it is important for students to have a responsible attitude towards studies when they are organized online just as towards contact studies”* (S 6); *“teachers should want to learn to use technologies”* (S 1). The participants in education noticed that distance teaching/learning required from everybody to act independently, setting priorities, indicating individual weaknesses, shortcomings and strengths: *“our children are of such age, when they are happy that mother is at work all the time and they don’t have to do anything <...> of course, this independence is desired. There is a bit of this self-dependence, some efforts are seen”* (P 2); *“pupils have to sincerely be responsible for themselves and to try to learn independently because it is very important. A pupil has to learn, and get used to being responsible for own performed tasks, actions and activities <...> this is where we teach pupils to be independent <...> now the conditions for that are perfect”* (ST 5); *“a student has to be able to learn individually, although s/he is supposed to be able to do that already...”* (S 9); *“for teachers it is important to have a wish to use new technologies and not to be distanced”* (S 5). Ability to act independently, efforts were important and provided an opportunity to faster see the steps of activity and its first results: *“without any doubts, pupils have to join online lessons to find out what tasks are assigned that day, etc.”* (ST 2); *“students have to join online lectures and be ready to work, <...> because if nobody connects... you may have the best plans but nothing will happen, <...> then, most probably, the most significant thing is students’ participation”* (UT 8); *“in fact a wish is needed to perform all the tasks because it depends on the child, on his/her attitude to learning. And here we have distance teaching/learning. You know, there is a significant difference between learning at school and learning online. The child’s disposition and efforts are necessary”* (P 8); *“it is important for teachers to better prepare before a lecture”* (S 4); *“the very preparation for a lecture is important <...> only the information presented during lectures will not give you a full result, therefore you have to read before it”* (S 1). The learners, who are motivated *“are always interested in everything”* (P 6) and their natural interest is shown through *“the questions asked during lectures”* (S 1). Education organizers may have a positive impact on building positive attitudes towards learning. Communication among stakeholders in education, provision of individualized care as well as general support is one of the most important objectives in the critical situation.

Need for supportive collaboration. Parents of minor school-aged children stated that teachers *“should also dedicate more time to older school learners”* (P 4). The teachers in the country characterised distance teaching/learning through collaboration while taking care of each other: *“support, that we gave to help each other <...> as it was written in the electronic letter, we should help each other and not to disturb the main departments. Many problems can be dealt with sharing various experience among colleagues”* (UT 7). The crisis situation provided conditions for perceiving exchange of good experience in a different, more simple and ordinary way. Personal professional experience and the results of conducted research showed the transformation of the teachers understanding of dissemination of good experience. It was as if rediscovered that not only new ideas, but also daily experience can be shared. Knowledge of how others work or act gave an opportunity to choose whether to follow them or to make individual solutions: *“there were very interesting examples <...> “I saw how others do this but I decided not to do the same, I decided to do in a different way and I did so”* (UT 1). The research participants noticed that communication according to the individual need is undoubtedly useful but communication is also necessary among groups of different levels: *“general school conception, communication within community”* (ST 7); *“perhaps collaboration is the most important thing: administration, teachers, parents and colleagues. This is the only thing. If everybody agrees among themselves, a lot can be achieved”* (ST 4). Mutual assistance while collaborating is observed among learners and parents of minor pupils: *“parents communicate and consult each other <...> classmates write to each other and clarify the topic”* (P 4); *“it is important not to be silent but to communicate”* (P 9). Thus, dissemination

of information and good experience should occur not only horizontally but also vertically. The relation between the teacher and the learner is of importance: *“the student should see the teacher. To decrease the level of student’s anxiety, s/he has to see who s/he is interacting with...”* (UT 2); *“a student has to be encouraged to be active all the time. The teacher has to encourage students because if the teacher doesn’t care, the students won’t connect. They will say: oh, it is not important”* (UT 2); *“every time to check every task that is assigned and to do this on time. Pupils have to get feedback because they grasp the system and know what is necessary”* (ST 5). The interaction between the teacher and the learner builds up the personality and, thus, it performs a more important role than just assimilation of new information.

Need for the teacher as a professional and a leader in the field. Higher education teachers see a direct connection between the success of distance teaching/learning and teachers’ professionalism and previous experience: *“professionalism and subject-specific knowledge”* (UT 4). Teaching face-to-face was perceived as a proper preparation for working online: *“definitely a certain experience in teaching is necessary. For example, a person who has started teaching gets distance and contact studies. It is very difficult. I think some experience in contact studies is also needed”* (UT 4). Teachers with more varied experience can easier avoid confusion in changing conditions. The university teacher’s professionalism is acquired through experience: *“however, this is the teacher’s work and experiences more because s/he knows best the taught subject, is aware of the system and of what to expect from students. There are a lot of and various specialities, so it is necessary to be aware”* (UT 6). The teacher plans learning and indicates the learning conditions: *“good planning is not only about what I’ll present but also how I’ll present at the same time considering the time”* (UT 8); *“everything starts with the teacher: how s/he presents information, how s/he devices plans, what requirements are set, <...> how all this is distributed <...> how it is organised”* (UT 1); *“seeking to teach something, you have to plan your lessons very well”* (ST 5). *“The teacher’s planning in advance”* contributes to success in distance learning (S 7). The expectations of parents and school learners were the same: *“it is important for teaching forms, agreements and used platforms to remain the same but most probably they won’t. For example, one teacher asked to communicate in one platform, another wanted a different one. Well, such a situation is complicated for children and parents”* (P 8). Smart flexibility considering the changed form of communication was desired: *“the most important thing is, most probably, is for teachers to be able to convey information online, when they cannot speak to students live”* (S 6). The learners expected from their teachers not only high-quality information, but they also allocated considerable attention to attractiveness of information presentation. In the period of technology development, it was expected that a teacher as a professional will search for new ways of teaching that better respond to the needs of young generation: *“perhaps a well-developed ability to use tools, which are used for lectures. <...> I would like to emphasise that this requirement applies to the teacher more. It is important for a student as well but more for a teacher”* (S 9); *“perhaps the teacher’s contribution to work. If school teachers used any online programs, it would be easier for children and easier for parents as well. To enable a child to understand assignments and what to do with them because now the information is meant for parents only”* (P 2). The informant revealed a constant search for the best solutions: *“the lessons should be very interesting to evoke children’s interest, to encourage them attend and listen”* (P 1); *“the teachers may tend to teach in this old or usual ways just like teaching face-to-face. I think these simple methods shouldn’t be the only ones. This virtual teaching is the best thing at this period and in this century”* (S 5); *“the teacher has to encourage new ways of information presentation, to search for new solutions <...> if children are not interested, they won’t listen. It has to be this way. It is necessary to evoke their interest and not only in distance learning”* (P 1). Teachers, who do not search for new, more attractive ways of information presentations that are more acceptable and understandable to learners not only fail to maintain the necessary interaction but also impose too much responsibility for learning on learners’ parents. The teacher’s didactic resourcefulness contributes to retaining the teacher-learner interaction, which is the main condition for teaching/learning especially at school.

The informants’ responses highlighted the need for trusting the teacher’s professionalism and for providing freedom of action. Distance teaching/learning that unexpectedly *“befell”* us all has to provide the teacher with freedom to plan and implement the educational process as flexible as possible: *“all the rest is the teacher’s ingenuity and creation”* (ST 2); *“the university teacher has to have the freedom to finish the lecture whenever s/he wants. Let’s say, to disconnect after an hour instead of staying online all the assigned time”* (S 7); *“the requirements are slightly lower now because assessment process is held*

online now and there're no conditions for ensuring academic honesty. So, different or more complex questions are given, which require more thinking rather than just providing information. Or smaller-scale tests are assigned or a different learning strategy is applied" (S 4).

Need for discipline and self-control. Transition to distance learning introduced additional disturbances: *"being in the lecture you can hear more. When you learn at home there are possibilities for getting distracted. To take a computer, for example- while listening to the lecture you can twitch on another program, social networks and they may distract you. Thus, you need more efforts to concentrate and to get distanced from the surrounding"* (S 4). The informants pointed out the importance of discipline in mobilising themselves and others for successful activities. Self-control provides conditions to become disciplined of the surrounding as well: *"not to get panicked and to keep a calm attitude towards everything <...> when parents get panicked, then children automatically get panicked too <...> what is going to happen and how <...> I say, stay calm <...> stay calm and wait patiently <...> just to move forward in small steps and not to try to do huge amount of work during one day to make everything smooth"* (P 4). Self-control starts with self-agreement. Conscious work, communication with self-establish favourable conditions for stabilisation and start of activities. The research participants pointed out that discipline is important to everybody: to students, university teachers, school teachers and parents, who help their school-aged children to learn online: *"to identify the rhythm for work"* (UT 1); *"the discipline for a child has to be present at home"* (P 8) *"a student has to have a high degree of discipline"* (UT 1). One informant provided an example of personal life to illustrate self-discipline: *"together with my husband we planned our life during the quarantine <...> at eight o'clock we watch two episodes of series, just two episodes and strictly at 8 o'clock, strictly two episodes. Not more, not fewer, not earlier and not later. The time comes, we leave everything, and it doesn't matter how you feel, what you are doing, etc. You have to keep to agreement. This helps, you get disciplined and plan everything. The time for coffee, the time for work, the time for relax"* (UT 1). It is important to know where and what you have to do and well as others: *"it is necessary to think over the load for pupils because <...>a pupil cannot spend 8 hours doing homework. The workload and once again the workload. You have to plan"* (ST 3). While planning activities it is essential to plan time: *"we all have to carefully plan time"* (UT 1); *"you have to take into consideration the time you have <...> lectures know also last forty minutes <...> it is very very important to take into account time"* (UT 8). Distance teaching/learning not only moved to the virtual space but also required different principles of work, which, consequently, called for a new understanding how to appropriately and effectively use time. Discipline is perceived as a multi-layered phenomenon: I discipline myself, I discipline others (a lecturer influences students' behaviour), I discipline activities (administration clearly plans, administrates the process of distance learning).

Technical issues. The actors in education consider equipment and means that provide conditions for virtual functioning as an element of successful distance teaching/learning: *"it is most important to be well technically provided for. Pupils have to have internet and computers. Teachers also have to have everything for online communication. If equipment is not available, you can think of a perfect lesson but you can't do anything else"* (ST 2); *"it is important to ensure proper functioning of systems and software"* (P 1); *"perhaps that everybody has technical equipment and is able to connect and be together"* (P 6). Technical and software problems create not only discomfort but also prevent from the set goals and take away a possibility for action: *"very frequently the connection is disturbed"* (P 1); *"sometimes technologies slightly fail and it becomes difficult to understand when there are video or audio disturbances. Conversation may not develop so well"* (S 1). In the current situation, the virtual space is the only space for activity expression. Implementing the teaching/learning process online, a system for functioning should be developed that regulates who does what. The learners express a wish that teachers should arrange provision of necessary information in the system in advance. However, technical issues were not distinguished in responses of informants and occupied only a small share of their reflections.

4. Discussion

The research results revealed how stakeholders in education process in Lithuania perceive implementation of distance teaching/learning under quarantine conditions. The main aspects of distance learning, which were pointed out by the informants are presented in Fig.1.

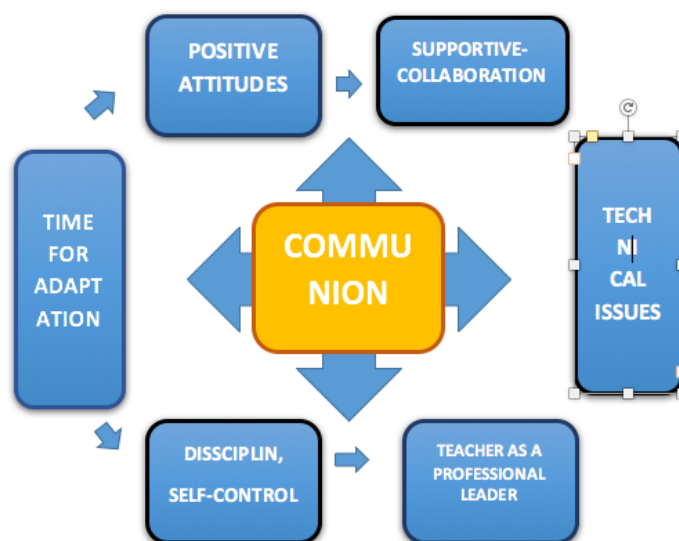


Figure 1. The main aspects of distance teaching/learning during the pandemic (prepared by the authors)

The analysis of links among categories showed that after transition to online learning during the pandemic, the dimension of communion and supportive collaboration acquired significance among actors in education. The categories distinguished in the responses of research participants are observed at all the levels of education and ensured successful activities of actors in education process in distance learning. The informants' interviews highlighted the significance of communication and communion in the beginning of crisis situation. Performing new activities even in the individualistic western society there emerged a need for communion and mobilization for joint activities in the critical situation. The necessity for providing help and care appeared and possibility of easier coping with difficulties together was pointed out. The human relation became of paramount importance. Preliminary qualitative inquiry of Japanese students in the early stage of pandemic revealed that social connection is critical as a means to create and enhance learning opportunities [1]. This was in line with the ideas of Smoyer et al. (2020) [18], who emphasize the importance of social connection, particularly in the context of emergency teaching. The majority of scientific studies provide for the relevance of teacher and relation with him/her in the technology-mediated process of learning [44; 45; 46]. In the crisis situation relations gain even more considerable importance [18] and the need for all the parties of the learning process, including the children's parents, emerges. Ralph A. Gigliotti (2020) claims that "incidents and emergencies happen, but crises are created through communication – and it is through communication that they must be addressed" [4]. S. Schut et al. (2020) found that high levels of teacher communion had a positive impact on the perception of assessment for learning, in particular in relations in which teachers' agency was less dominantly exercised [47]. Findings from Smoyer A.B., O'Brien K., Rodriguez-Keyes E (2020) study showed that remote learning shapes the interpersonal relationships and communication that are so critical to building students' sense of classroom belonging, engagement, and learning [18]. They examined student feedback about educational experiences during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic and indicated that class structure and instructor communication had positive effect in building community. It allowed students to be seen and known by others. These efforts bolstered their engagement with the class and kept them motivated.

Our research revealed an interesting phenomenon, when in the crisis situation actors in education process became more demanding of themselves than of others. The analysed research data indicate tolerance towards others or even gratitude and support. This is an exceptional manifestation of relation with community in the individualistic society. A theoretical implication, the results of R.A. Gigliotti (2020) study draw our attention towards the construction of crisis and the role of communication in shaping how these crises are experienced [4]. In the crisis situation, the participants in our research wanted not only to be informed about the activity itself but also about the resulting

situation, changes in it seeking to reduce the level of anxiety. N.B. Milman (2020) emphasizes that “frequent, straightforward, and honest communication is essential. Not only does it address questions the students and families might have, but it also gives assurance that management staff has a plan—even if it is evolving”. Our research clearly showed that the informants wanted clarity, precise instructions, whereas the state of discomfort hindered perception and assimilation of information. In the beginning of lockdown some kind of personal attention and care was necessary. Individual care shortened the period of adaptation and created a certain emotional comfort. The lack of human interaction is challenging during pandemic [18]. Absence or shortage of care to meet individual needs caused lower self-confidence, reduced initiative among the research participants, what had a negative influence on their attitude towards learning during the pandemic. Thus, institutional support, including appropriate training, is essential for faculty members to comfortably engage in online teaching [49].

Our research revealed that a period of adaptation is needed starting a new activity. The participants in our research referred to such a period as necessary for emotional mindset and self-empowerment to act in a new situation. F. Tavares et al. (2020) found in their study that most individuals considered that adapting to working online during Covid19 pandemic was easy or very easy and that it happened quickly [23]. Authors recommend to ensure teleworking during normal working hours, to maintain focus as well as concentration and manage time/hours well. The results of our research coincided with those of F. Tavares et al. (2020), who claimed that the main difficulties encountered in teleworking were the lack of interaction/professional communication with co-workers, the lack of support infrastructure resources, such as internet or printer, reconciling teleworking with family life/household chores/dedication to children and the time/schedule management [23]. Thus, in the beginning of new activity all the necessary information has to be provided taking into consideration that this stage is significant. School leaders should work with faculty and staff, as well as other school leaders [48]. School leaders, teachers should not only provide information about situation and about further actions but also engage community members in decision-making: “When possible and relevant, a diverse range of voices must be included in decision-making; this will not only recognize their roles as part of the learning community but also foster buy-in” [48]. Such a tendency is also observed under conditions of usual learning: there is a shift from a single teacher / single education system to more collaborative planning [50].

One more dimension that was revealed in the research referred to the importance of personal positive disposition facing the crisis. The informants indicated a positive attitude as an essential factor that contributes to successful coping with a critical situation. However, an internal positive attitude towards distance learning does not ensure active participation of an individual and success of activity. Communication plays a crucial role here. Courses that lacked personal communication and interaction inhibited students’ ability to stay engaged and motivated [18]. Communication while instructing, which introduces clarity, and constant identification of needs can contribute to success. Bubb S. and Jons M.A. (2020) gathered the views of those involved in home-schooling during pandemic: school leaders, teachers, pupils and parents [3]. The study showed the satisfaction of all participants. The best evidence of satisfaction is as follows: “Fantastic teachers in this class who are just a phone call away if we as guardians are wondering about something! Can’t praise them enough!”. This quote perfectly shows that availability of teachers is necessary. All the stakeholders in education need maintenance of motivation, encouragement and creation of favourable conditions to act [51]. Our research disclosed the importance of constant enhancement of motivation. Collaboration among the actors in education process help to retain motivation and to mobilise for a new activity. This is a unique opportunity to learn from and with one another, and not just within one’s district or state [48]. Redistribution of social roles was noticed in the crisis situation during the COVID-19 pandemic quarantine. Academic titles, professional merits and working experience became secondary. Mobilization, positive attitudes and communion were prioritised then.

The difficulties related to time planning emerged during the research in the dimension of self-control and discipline. A new activity, i.e. distance teaching/learning, was unfamiliar and, therefore, it was complicated to plan own time and that of others. However, planning itself is significant. When working online, distance is ignored, and the technical profile and self-discipline of the employee are

important in the profile of the employee so that he or she can develop the work efficiently and effectively [52]. Inappropriate planning of time leads not only to failure to implement educational goals in the lesson /lecture but also to increased workload for teacher and learners. It is important to establish routines and schedules for virtual conferences, meetings, and communications [48].

The research showed that during the critical period of learning, the participants expected competent leadership from the teacher. Our study was consistent with previous research efforts regarding the role of teacher leadership – individually or collectively – in influencing colleagues and school communities to enhance teaching and learning practices [53]. The lack of teacher's leadership transfers responsibility for learning on parents' shoulders or the learners themselves. Then tension-caused fatigue and certain distraction may appear.

An exceptional attention in distance teaching/learning should be focused on information presentation while searching for more understandable and attractive ways for learners. The research showed that such search requires providing the teacher with freedom of action and as little control as possible. Stickney L.T., Bento R. F., Aggarwal A. F. (2019) found in their study that higher education faculties who teach online satisfaction is more likely if there is appropriate training, and if teaching online allows for flexibility in their schedules [49].

Striving for successful activities in the virtual environment, prior preparation of all the actors in education process is necessary. However, in online teaching/learning preparation in advance is more linked with technical readiness rather than with academic one. The smoother is the functioning of the used platform, software and hardware, the more favourable learning conditions are ensured.

5. Conclusions

The research allows concluding that after successful transition to distance learning the dimensions of communion and supportive collaboration acquired importance among stakeholders in education. This ensured successful activities of participants in distance learning. Starting new activities, a need for communion and mobilization for joint activities under the crisis situation emerges even in the individualistic western society. Our research showed that adaptation period was necessary in the beginning of new activity. The research participants referred to the necessity of such a period for emotional mindset and self-empowerment under new conditions. All the actors in education needed enhancement of motivation, encouragement and establishment of appropriate conditions for activity. The research highlighted the category of self-control and discipline, which embraced necessity of time planning and related difficulties. Therefore, it is important to establish routines and schedules.

It was identified that the competent leadership was expected from the teacher during the critical period in learning. According to the informants, the teacher needs freedom of action and little control for leadership to reveal.

Seeking to successfully act in the virtual space, advance preparation of all the actors in education process was needed. Technical preparation rather than academic one was emphasized. However, relatively little attention to technical issues and technical disturbances was allocated in the informants' reflections.

This education system stockholder's reflections on educational experiences during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic reflects and expands upon existing literature about online education in crisis situation. The results cannot be understood as an evaluation of online learning, since the participants were suddenly placed in unfamiliar environment and that was new experience for them. However, the data do offer a window into the dynamics of online teaching in crisis situation and experiences in new activity that are key to success.

Limitations. The research aimed at a general and quick overview of how stakeholders in education perceive a rapid transition to distance learning. The pupils were not included into the research because due to isolation it was not possible to get permission from the parents. The responses of separate groups of stakeholders in education were not compared. The reasons that could have conditioned such an opinion of informants were not analysed either. Further research could include the responses to the same question after a certain period of time when the system settled down. With the help of quantitative and qualitative research it would be useful to identify where

separate groups in education system (university teachers, parents, teachers, pupils and their parents) see possibilities for improving distance and hybrid learning. Further research could focus on the question how communion and supportive collaboration develops further, to what extent this aspect remains important or becomes more important than other aspects that contribute to coping with a crisis situation.

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