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## **How can a pandemic transform education?**

### **Activities of the MPC in the period of Covid-19**

MPC (Methodology and Pedagogy Centre) is the organization of the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic (MoE). Supports the Professional Development of Teachers in 9 regional offices, offers training programmes and attestation for teachers, provides specialized seminars, conferences and consulting and advisory activities, implements projects funded by the EU at national and international level.

At the time of the anti-pandemic measures, which limited direct contact and the implementation of face-to-face education, one of the communication channels with teachers was the professional journal Pedagogical Views. The introductory text was actually a kind of diary of events, activities and the response of the teacher training institution to the current situation.

#### **1. PART - APRIL**

There has been a long-standing debate in Slovakia about teacher training. Its necessity, importance, forms, quality, credits and motivation of teachers themselves to work on themselves in the sense of professional development. Today, when the Korona virus pandemic has significantly changed the conditions of everyday life and education, **we are experiencing the necessary professional development, so to speak in a live broadcast - online.** Literally.



Both students and teachers have moved to the relative safety of the home environment behind computers and phones and are trying to adjust the teaching process. In the very first few weeks, we found that adjusting the educational process that we had been taught to do in a school setting to a completely different environment was not easy or even fully feasible. The basic challenge for teachers and school directors was and still is to master the skills of technical support and to set up communication channels with pupils and their parents.

First, we leveraged available digital resources, apps and programs to deliver content. Incidentally, more skilled colleagues have ventured into online learning. We inundated pupils and their parents with homework. But we are gradually discovering that it is neither practical nor beneficial, in the long run of such a teaching method, to just deliver the material digitally, refer pupils to literature, resources and turn the tasks over to parents. It shows how important it is to manage home-based learning from the principal level but also other levels of management. At the level of subject committees, methodological associations and learning areas, it is necessary and useful to integrate assignments and to formulate joint educational objectives (e.g. for a week) across several subjects in a year group or class.

In these conditions, the role and responsibility of the class teacher comes to the fore, who should be able to work closely with colleagues who teach in his/her class. To coordinate and, if necessary, regulate the volume and frequency of assignments and outputs within his/her class. Provide information to parents, sensing their suggestions and problems. To communicate them to colleagues and school management and to be cooperative in solving problems that arise. Every teacher is confronted with the need to personalize instruction, taking into account the conditions and background of the individual student. Changing the conditions of teaching concerns the whole spectrum of professional competences of teaching and professional staff. In all categories, sub-categories. And it affects all management and specialist activities.

In the sense of the proverb "Everything bad is good for something good", this situation is a challenge for the real strengthening of teacher professionalism in all three areas of professional standards. Coping with the current situation requires us to increase the level of competences focused on pupil cognition, on processes aimed at pupil development and competences related to the role of the teacher and to our own self-improvement through learning from experience and from the experience of colleagues, through creative activity and reflection on our own practice as well as through training from the offer of domestic or foreign providers.

For this reason, the articles in this special issue of our magazine focus on selected topics and changes, ...

## 2. PART - MAY

The measures against the spread of the coronavirus introduced since March 2020 have affected all areas of our lives. Information on the development of the pandemic fills almost the entire media space. Education in schools and educational establishments has been interrupted and has been transferred to the home environment. We have been looking for and are looking for ways to adapt to the situation on a daily basis. It would seem that previously such important topics for discussion as **the findings of the State School Inspection, the results of the PISA measurement and the report on the 2030 Agenda** have lost their relevance and dealing with the suggestions and recommendations arising from them is not currently relevant.



But the opposite is true. It is the turning upside down of the entire education process that has exposed its weaknesses in full light and confirmed the statement in the Agenda 2030 Report that there have been no fundamental changes in the education system in terms of changing it to remove rigidity and strengthen its ability to respond flexibly to the presence and evolution of global megatrends. We should therefore think about how to capitalise on the educational opportunity that, paradoxically, the pandemic has created for us. To take up the challenge for a significant rethinking not only of the form, but above all of the content of education.

At the outset, the most important thing was to provide education in a form other than face-to-face. Which requires teachers to make active and, above all, interactive use of new media, audiovisual content and full-fledged audiovisual aids in the processes of education and training. At the same time, there has been much discussion about the amount of curriculum, what is core curriculum and what is essential for and also the time that children and their parents alike have to spend on home learning. When integration of content area learning, coordination of individual teachers' practices, project assignments, and exploratory activities in the home environment proved meaningful.

Released tasks from the international PISA testing could also have been a suitable inspiration. We are currently tackling the question of whether, if at all, and how, to assess what pupils have learned. But we should not forget to assess the extent to which we have enabled them to acquire the knowledge and skills that are essential for their future full participation in society. In other words, we have put into practice the professional competences we already possess. We may even have improved them, and we may have gained new knowledge and competences. We have carried out our own professional development, which is also addressed in the broader context of the 2030 Agenda report on the achievements of the national priorities for its implementation.

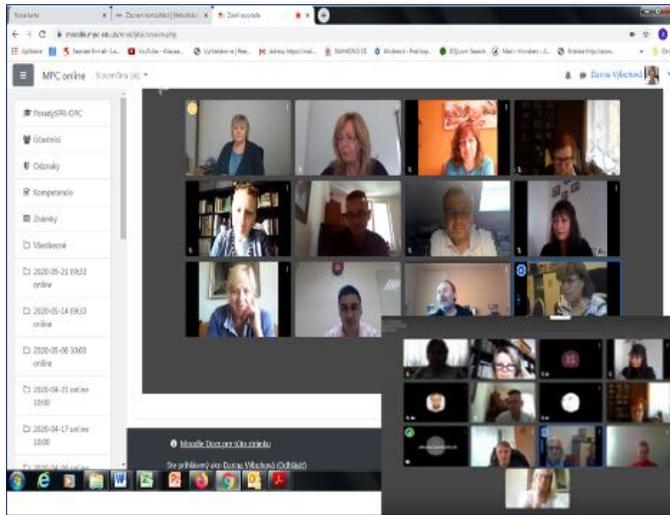
In the chapter on Education for a dignified life, it recalls, among other things, the need to improve the quality of education and to strengthen the social status of teachers in the context of international comparisons and global megatrends. It is futile to think that the teaching profession's esteem and status will be enhanced by someone who is asked to do so by some regulation, proclamation or law. We can only change our status, esteem and respect for the profession we practice by honouring our own professionalism, respecting the demands placed on us in the profession and embracing the challenges.

Challenge inspires, motivates and leads to discovering our potential, using it and acquiring new competences. Yes, a challenge can be threatening and hide risks. But we can also eliminate these in the future by preparing today for the next challenge. We hope that the articles in 2nd issue of the journal dedicated to coping with the covid period in schools ...

### **3. PART - JUNE**

This year's "**hooray for the holidays**" was different than in years past. It was different because the whole school year 2019/2020 was also completely different. After ten years, the continuing education system for teaching and professional staff was changed by a new law to a professional development system. And we had to learn new terms and procedures in addition to new concepts. And to make matters worse, at the beginning of March came not only the expected spring, but also an unexpected pandemic. The situation created by the rapid spread of the COVID-19 virus has shown the need for flexibility on the part of teachers and the need for professional competences that will enable them to cope with specific challenges in the future and to face the various challenges and threats that affect

school education. From pandemic diseases to extremist violence, to climate uncertainty as well as rapid technological change.



The Methodological and Pedagogical Centre, after discontinuing the face-to-face form of education, moved the educational activities to the online space. By redesigning its website, it has created new opportunities for online learning and guidance in the form of webinars, teacher forums and consultations for teaching and

professional staff (TAs and TAs). This new form of training was more organisationally demanding compared to face-to-face training. Expert assistance was required not only by those interested in online education, but also by lecturers who had not yet worked in an online environment and had only basic IT skills. In doing so, it was necessary to implement and complete continuous education in accredited educational programmes of functional education, functional innovation education, update education and specialisation education in the period from March to the beginning of June in accordance with the transitional provisions of Act No. 138/2019 Coll. on pedagogical employees and professional employees and on amendment and supplementation of certain acts, as amended. A total of 902 PZ and OZ participated in these training programmes. In order to respond to the needs of teachers, we have started to offer webinars mainly focused on topical issues:

- professional development, portfolio, certification,
- how to educate in times of school closures,
- digital support for home learning,
- issues of assessment and grading of distance learners,
- assessment of pupils with special educational needs,
- the content of education for the first level of primary schools with VJM during special school interruption,
- the content of SJSL education for the second level of primary school with VJM during the extraordinary interruption of teaching,
- the education of pupils from the MRC who do not have access to the Internet,

- cooperative learning and active pupil learning.

The interest was high right from the start and a total of 89 webinars were held, attended by 1.131 people. As with all training events conducted in a face-to-face format, after the webinars were completed, we asked the participants by questionnaires to express their opinion about the event they had attended.

Participants positively evaluated the interesting, stimulating, inspiring and useful topics, appreciated the practical demonstrations and themes. Offering webinars eliminated regional differences in MPC offerings and strengthened networking across the country. However, critical comments and the identification of areas for improvement are also important for us to improve the quality of the offer of technical and methodological assistance.

In addition to the positive feedback, participants also named the fact that they felt there was limited opportunity to meet each other and communicate verbally, and that they lacked social interaction. They felt insecure and uncomfortable when learning online without adequate technical support, quality of local internet signal. They perceived the self-study tasks, the amount of information conveyed and the short time span of the activities as a burden.

It is also to eliminate these negatives that we offer Consultations for individuals and groups, provided by professional development teachers according to the topic focus and timeline available at <https://mpc-edu.sk/individualne-konzultacie>. The changes in educational conditions and social interactions that we have experienced in the context of measures to counter the spread of coronavirus have been an opportunity to recognise the importance of the skills that teachers and learners alike need in this unpredictable world.

These are, for example, informed decision making, creative problem solving and, above all, adaptability. It is essential that their development, both within school education and as part of professional development, remains a priority for our education systems even after the acute threat of a pandemic has passed, thereby increasing the likelihood of successfully adapting to changing conditions for the implementation of the educational process for whatever reasons in the future. Sharing, reflecting and evaluating current experience is a prerequisite for making the best of this challenging period.

Also on the MPC website, we have created Teacher Online Forums, which provide a space for online discussion by focus area. A list of Teacher Online Forums is available at <https://mpc-edu.sk/ucitelske-fora>. Right from the

beginning of the transition to homeschooling, advice, inspiration, created support materials, tips and tricks from teachers for teachers have been popping up on the internet and various social networking sites. We have focused on selecting and creating methodological materials, teaching resources and methodological inspirations authored by professional development teachers or created in collaboration with trainers and trainees.

Outputs from national and international MPC projects are also available. All materials are freely available at: [https://mpc-edu.sk/publikacie\\_vsetky](https://mpc-edu.sk/publikacie_vsetky) and <https://mpc-edu.sk/kratke-metodicke-inspiracie> It was a good help in this exposed period. But now that the stress has subsided and we can relax a bit, it is also time to reflect, describe our teaching experience and present it in the professional press, publications and professional forums.

Analyse the findings and propose solutions, preventive measures for the development of professional competences for teachers at the school, subject committee, methodological association or educational area level. Recording, sharing and evaluating pedagogical experiences is the essence of professional growth of pedagogical and professional school staff.

Teachers' examples, records and observations on specific aspects of the educational process should be a starting point and a source of ideas, for example, when developing the content of refresher education programmes in the next school year. One of the areas of professional competence that should be discussed and improved is the area of cooperation and coordination in the integration of educational content within the educational areas, contextual teaching and the development of functional literacy.

Using a variety of resources and locations (including the home environment) for exploration and learning. For the summer months, we have prepared a summer offer of webinars and professional articles for those who plan to use this period not only for relaxation, but also to prepare for the new school year and to develop their professional skills.

In the third issue of our magazine, we offer its readers a total of 15 articles. The mainstays are devoted to literacy, continuing the theme we introduced in Issue 2/2020.

#### 4. PART - SEPTEMBER



The new school year has begun. Summer is still fading into warm sunny days and maybe a nice Indian summer awaits us. However, the return to school is in many ways reminiscent of a winter march through an avalanche-prone area in a heavy snowfall. Except that we are wading through high snow because the demands placed on the quality of education are ever higher. Schools and educational establishments are expected to create the conditions for their pupils to acquire a wide range of knowledge, skills and personal qualities for their future careers.

We work with class and school teams, which are made up of pupils from diverse family and cultural backgrounds. Their assumptions, knowledge base and competences are not the same. At any given moment, the conditions and environment in which the educational process is carried out may change dramatically again. Figuratively speaking, an avalanche of information tasks, obligations and expectations that we should fulfil will hit us. And in this case, as in the case of avalanche danger, the recommendation *"preparation is the key"* is also valid.

This means keeping track of the current situation, knowing the risks and how to avoid them, making sure you have the necessary equipment and fitness. By analogy, this means that the teacher should be prepared to flexibly adapt his/her approach to the preparation, implementation and evaluation of the educational process, along with a greater emphasis on the learner's proactivity and taking responsibility for his/her own learning in the changed conditions. Another useful piece of advice says: *"When hit by an avalanche, even if it is difficult, it is important to remain calm. A simple principle applies. The higher you are, the better chance you have of survival. Therefore, try to "swim" in the avalanche and always be on top of it"*.

This does not mean that directors have it easiest. Rather, interpreting this advice in the context of school education encourages keeping perspective and focusing

on the essentials. This is especially so when setting educational goals, designing assignments and learning activities, for example, including for learning in the home environment. It might also be useful to apply the advice "*...it is advisable to hike in larger groups as it increases the chances of someone getting out of an avalanche and calling for help. If you go alone, the risk of someone finding you in an avalanche is very small.*" Effective teamwork, mutual learning and cooperation with parents of pupils and children are key not only during the anti-pandemic period. Sharing experiences is an important element of cooperation.

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The content of this issue of Pedagogical Views has the ambition to address the reader with a selection of current topics and to motivate him/her to a deeper analysis of selected aspects of his/her own educational activity in order to relieve his/her possible professional uncertainty and to increase the level of his/her professional competences in the form of self-education, adequately to the requirements and conditions.

While it is true that theoretical practices advise us how to behave and recommend best practices, there can always be a situation that is specific and catches us by surprise. In such a case, another rule of avalanche behaviour is probably useful: "*Don't shout. It will only exhaust you, you're wasting your already precious oxygen, and no one is likely to hear your voice anyway. Only start shouting when you can hear the rescuers.*" Loosely paraphrased for a school setting, "Don't get upset that something caught you off guard, don't blame everyone around you, it will only distract you from the root of the problem. Take your problem to a place where they can help you manage the situation so that it doesn't catch you by surprise next time. The topics, information and ideas in the following articles are also offered as a helping hand, along with our autumn offering of training and professional events.

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