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ATTITUDES OF SECONDARY VOCATIONAL SCHOOL STUDENTS ON THE TEACHING OF SOCIOLOGY DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Abstract: This paper will present a part of the research for the purpose of preparing a doctoral dissertation entitled "Teaching in the Republic of Serbia in the subject of sociology during the COVID-19 pandemic", which was carried out in secondary vocational schools throughout the Republic of Serbia. The research was conducted in all five statistical regions, in schools that were randomly selected, and among students of the third and final grades, that is, students attending sociology classes in the third grade the previous year and students attending sociology classes this year. We compared their views, because classes in the 2020/2021 school year were mostly online or in a hybrid model, while classes in the 2021/2022 school year took place mainly in classrooms, i.e., in real space or according to a hybrid model, but with certain modifications such as possible shortening of classes, reduction of teaching materials, dividing students into groups, etc. One segment of the questionnaire examines students' attitudes and opinions about the teaching of sociology during the COVID-19 pandemic and whether the classic (live) way of teaching sociology was better, worse, or whether they believe that everything is the same and that the differences exist only in the way of conducting classes. Although European development strategies, including the Strategy for the National Development of Education by 2030 in the Republic of Serbia from June 2021, advocate the opening of online schools, the results of this research show that our schools, teaching staff and students are still not ready for this type of teaching.

Keywords: sociology teaching, COVID-19, education, online-teaching, hybrid teaching

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INTRODUCTION

In the conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic, numerous changes took place in all areas of society, but in this paper, attention will be focused only on the changes that occurred in the educational system of the Republic of Serbia, that is, the changes that occurred in the teaching of sociology, with a number of specific characteristics in the researched period. When the pandemic was announced in the Republic of Serbia, the healthcare workers were the first to be affected, then followed by teachers and students who had to adapt to the changes that took place at all costs. The main change in the educational process is the transition from live classes to online classes. We will not list various definitions of online teaching here because there are too many of them; it is enough to point out that "all definitions of online teaching have in common that the student is physically distant from the teacher, that he uses digital tools and the Internet in order to access learning materials and interact with the teacher and other students" (Kuzmanović, 2022: 36). Accordingly, this research is planned to establish the experiences of students in secondary vocational schools in relation to online teaching that was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic. For this purpose, a Google questionnaire was created under the title *Teaching in the Republic of Serbia in the subject of sociology, during the COVID-19 pandemic* and it was successfully implemented. The questionnaire contains 22 questions, a few of which will be presented in this paper. The selected questions refer to students' views on the quality of online teaching in the subject of sociology for the period from 2021 to 2022. Moreover, the problems and difficulties encountered by students during the online teaching of sociology will be presented, their views on the whether the teachers trusted the students during the assessment, as well as what the interaction between the teachers and students was like during the online and live classes. This research was conducted online, in all five statistical regions in the Republic of Serbia in regular secondary vocational schools. At the beginning of the 2021/2022 school year, there were 408 regular secondary vocational schools. Half of the total number of these schools were contacted, of which some schools were not interested in cooperation, and in some schools they emphasized that they wanted to send the questionnaire to the students, but that they were too busy so they probably would not make it. Therefore, in a sample of 204 schools, some schools they were not ready to help scientific research, while other schools, depending on the majors, one or two classes were included, more precisely only the final year or both the third and final years. The research was carried out by calling the principals or professional assistants on the official, i.e., school phone number, so the questionnaire was sent to them, as agreed, to the school's official e-mail or forwarded to them via Viber. In addition, some sociology teachers also forwarded the questionnaire to their colleagues, so we could not strictly adhere to the sample of 204 schools. The decision to conduct the research in this way was made because of the very idea that if the teaching took place online, then it was all right to conduct the research online too. As many as 759 responses were received to the conducted questionnaire, out of which 172 responses were rejected as invalid because they were answered by high school students who attended sociology live, i.e., directly in the classrooms, so we had a total of 587 questionnaires at our disposal.

In the Republic of Serbia, the first case of infection with the SARS-CoV-2 virus, later called COVID-19, was registered on 6 March 2020, and the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development met on March 16, 2020 and made a decision that "due to the current epidemiological situation in the country, immediate educational work in primary and secondary schools in the territory of the Republic of Serbia should be temporarily suspended" (Decision of MESTD 2020, No. 601-00-9/1/2020-01). By the decision of the same authority, teaching was implemented through distance learning, whereby schools had to adapt teaching to their own capabilities, but also to take care of those students who were at risk, that is, those students who had a worse socio-economic status, as well as those students who did not have access to information and communication means.

IMPLEMENTATION OF EDUCATIONAL WORK AND MEASURES ADOPTED DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA

As early as March 17, 2020, when teaching in schools, including the teaching of sociology, began to be conducted online, additional and precise instructions were sent to the schools on the methods of conducting the teaching, whereby the teachers were given the opportunity to plan how they would implement their classes, but not to change the curricula and programs, but to adhere to them- As proof of maintaining the lessons and monitoring the work of the students, all teachers submitted operational plans to the schools on a weekly basis, which were unified and forwarded to the school administrations. Therefore, in the first moments of the pandemic in Serbia, namely in the first school year that was affected by the pandemic, and in connection with education in secondary schools, only the way of work changed. At the level of the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development, it was decided to switch from classes held live in real conditions to classes held remotely. Based on the analysis of 2019/2020, the first school year affected by the pandemic, it can be seen that the monitoring of scientific achievements, including professional training of teachers, especially in the fields of information technology, was necessary. Principals, professional associates, and especially teachers were expected to keep up with modern information technologies. As S. Gvozdenović states in one of his works, "in order to encourage positive changes in others, the teachers must start with themselves; they must continuously work on self-education, on improving individual and professional self-knowledge" (Gvozdenović, 2007: 168). Speaking of the educational cycle, we can definitely mark this period at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic as a period of increased need for professional training of teachers. However, the solution is not only in the professional development of teachers but, as I have stated earlier in one of my papers, the solution and "way out of the crisis lies in greater investment in education, in knowledge and promoting research, and the school program itself should be focused on creativity and innovation" (Jakovljević, 2022: 246).

The aim of every class, whether it is held live or remotely, is to be successful from the teaching perspective and from the perspective of the teaching material being learnt by the students. And in order to be able to determine teaching as successful, the teacher must be more competent, and in order to be more competent, teachers must improve professionally. That is why, as Todorović, Milin and Vujačić write, "professional training of teachers is a very important link in providing quality teachers, since it represents the dominant framework for improving their professional competences" (Todorović, Milin, Vujačić, 2016: 47). Although the 2020/2021 school year began as usual in classrooms, schools were given access to a large number of online platforms, and by the decision of the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development in July 2020, schools chose one platform that would be used for remote teaching, so in that regard schools were obliged to "provide support to those teachers who did not have the necessary knowledge and skills to work on the chosen platform" (Decision of MESTD 2020, No. 601-00-00027/2020-15). Also, the MESTD offered full support to the schools, in the form of enabling the strengthening of the digital competences of teachers and professional associates, and the schools were provided with technical support in the form of computers and laptops and various educational materials were delivered to the teachers etc. By the decision of 20 November 2020, it was already decided that from 23 November until the end of the first semester on 18 December 2020, the entire educational work would be carried out remotely, as well as that schools would have to choose by themselves the channels of communication with students. At the beginning of the 2021/2022 school year, the organization of educational work was somewhat different than the previous year. On 1 September, most secondary schools in the Republic of Serbia started working according to the first model of teaching organization, which implied the presence of teachers and students in schools, who were obliged to comply with anti-epidemic measures. Depending on the course of this infectious disease, two more models of teaching organization were proposed. In the municipalities with a large number of patients, the Team for Monitoring and Coordinating the Application of Preventive Measures in the Work of Schools made a proposal that in 15 secondary schools in the Republic of Serbia teaching took place according to the second model, i.e., according to the combined model, while the third model was applied only in one municipality. As early as 9 September, the Team made the decision about switching to online teaching in 40 municipalities. And that "third model of the organization of educational work would be applied from September 13, 2021, in all secondary schools in the municipalities and cities mentioned in Item 1 of this decision" (Decision of MESTD 2021, 601-03-00033/4/2021-15). This decision indicated a significant increase in the number of infected people in school environments, which was why these measures were taken to prevent the spread of the virus. With the next session on 16 September 2021, a slight decrease in the number of infected people in school environments was recorded, so 45 secondary schools would function according to the second model of the organization of educational work, while eight would function according to the third online model, including the schools located in the territory of the Autonomous Province of Kosovo and Metohija.

The very next decision, which came into force on 4 October 2021, indicated the effectiveness of the measures as well as the reduction in the number of infected people in school environments, so all secondary schools continued to work according to the first model, i.e., with direct teaching in schools, except in 23 municipalities where teaching took place according to the combined, model. And the next decision of the Team, which was made on 23 September 2021, stated that from 27 September 2021, teaching would take place according to the second model in 18 municipalities, while in three munic-ipalities the third model would be applied. Due to the decision of 23 September 2021 and regular monitoring of the epidemiological situation by the end of the school year, no major increase in the number of infected people was recorded in school environ-ments, so there was no need to conduct classes according to the third model. However, classes according to the combined model took place in some municipalities until 22 November 2021.

After that period, until June 2022, classes in all secondary schools in the Republic of Serbia took place according to the first model, in classrooms. By reviewing the letters, decisions and recommendations sent to secondary schools by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development, and in connection with conducting classes in pandemic conditions, it can be concluded that, from 17 March 2020 until the end of that school year, classes, including sociology classes, were conducted online. The next school year began under normal conditions, that is, classes took place directly in classrooms, but from 23 November 2020 until the end of the first semester on 18 December 2020, the entire educational work took place through platforms and various educational portals. From the beginning of the 2021/2022 school year, classes were conducted mainly online and in a combined model until 22 November 22 2021, and from then until the end of this school year, classes were held in classrooms.

TEACHING SOCIOLOGY DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA – RESEARCH RESULTS

Prior to the presentation of the research results, Table 1 will show a sample accord-ing to socio-demographic variables, in order to have an insight into elementary data.

Table 1: The sample according to socio-demographic variables

Gender	male	257	43.8%
	female	327	55.7%
Type of place of residence	in the countryside	216	36.8%
	in a city/town with up to 50,000 inhabitants	159	27.1%
	in a city with 50,000 - 100,000 inhabitants	71	12.1%
	in a city with over 100,000 inhabitants	119	20.3%
	in a city with over 1,000,000 inhabitants	22	3.7%

What characterizes the teaching of sociology before the outbreak of the pandemic is direct teaching in classrooms, while during the COVID-19 pandemic, there were significant changes, starting with the way in which teaching is conducted and then the quality of teaching. It is known that sociology in secondary schools plays a big role in the development and education of students who are soon to become adults. In accordance with that, the students' views on the quality of online teaching will be presented in the further work.

Table 2: Students' attitudes about the quality of online teaching

Online teaching is:	Frequency	Percentage
Much better and more useful. Students learn more.	49	8.3%
It is only a different way; Learning is equally good.	209	35.6%
It is much worse. Nothing is learnt. We have to do everything by ourselves.	329	56.0%
Total	587	100.0%

Although with the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, when teaching first took place online, sociology lost its 'strength', as shown by the results of the research, where more than half of the respondents answered that the online teaching of sociology was much worse compared to classes that took place live. Out of the total number of 587 respondents, 329 of them (or 56%) answered that online teaching was much worse and that nothing was learnt; 209 respondents answered that it was just a different way of teaching, and that the same things were learnt, which would account for 35.6% of the respondents; 49 respondents, or 8.3%, answered that online classes were much better and more useful than live classes, as well as that much more was learnt during them.

Here, it is necessary to review the aspirations from the Strategy for the national Development of Education by 2030, which was adopted in February 2021. According to this Strategy, "the foundations for the development of digital education at the pre-university level have been established" (Strategy for the National Development of Education by 2030, 2021: 36). We could agree with this because in recent years there has been an accelerated development of the IT sector, and education has been directed in that direction since March 2020 due to pandemic conditions, so it even became mandatory at one point, which we can see in the Decision of the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development of 17 March 2020, where it is stated: "we instruct the principals, professional associates and teachers that distance learning is the responsibility of everyone at school" (Decision of MESTD 2020, no. 601-00-9/1/2020-01). However, we cannot agree, as the presented results show, with the need and desire to establish a "state online primary school and state online grammar school" (Strategy for the National Development of Education by 2030, 2021: 36).

Although educational institutions in the Republic of Serbia have improved their digital capacities, intensified their work on strengthening teachers' competencies, the

results show that students are not ready for this type of teaching. This will be corroborated in Table 3 below by the results of the research conducted by Đorđić, Cvijetić and Damjanović on teachers and their experiences during the implementation of distance learning due to the corona virus pandemic.

Table no. 3: Teachers' attitudes about students' work during online classes.

	1	2	3	4	5
Students do their tasks independently	97 (18.13%)	200 (37.38%)	182 (34.02%)	50 (9.35%)	6 (1.12%)

Key: 1 - I do not agree at all, 2 - I do not agree, 3 - I neither agree nor disagree, 4 - I agree, 5 - I completely agree (Đorđić, Cvijetić, Damjanović, 2021: 96)

Based on their research, it can be seen that 55.42% of the respondents do not agree that students do their tasks independently. Furthermore, the majority of teachers do not agree with students doing their assignments independently, because the quality of online teaching is not at an enviable level, a large number of students do not have digital competences, students have technical problems, they can cheat when doing assignments, they can to be helped by parents, guardians, friends, etc. Additionally, "in electronic classes, the teacher cannot create a true picture of the level of student participation in class, or an insight into whether the student clearly understands the material covered" (Stepanović, 2020: 188). On the other hand, the conditions were such that the teachers as well as the students, despite everything, had to adapt and independently find ways to get the students to cooperate during the online teaching. Although in one of his papers dealing with online teaching Stojanović states that "the quality of education is at a higher level" (Stojanović, 2020: 122) in online teaching, we could not agree with this statement because, based on the research conducted by the Institute for the Improvement of Education, it can be concluded that teachers do not trust their students, and that students are not ready for independent work, which will be seen in the following table. It shows that 33.5% of students, according to the teachers, have a low level of digital competences, as well as that 52.3% of students do not have access to resources and technologies. And according to the results of the research we conducted, out of a total of 587 respondents, as many as 150 of them (or 52.6%) answered that they had no interest in following online classes, and therefore the quality of such classes could not be good. Also, "online teaching, as a modern form of distance education, is associated with problems in socialization, the absence of interaction and active participation of students in the teaching process, delayed or scarce feedback from the teacher" (Kuzmanović, 2022: 34) so that the psychological and socialization aspect should also be taken into account, especially since this refers to adolescents.

According to the part of this Institute's survey conducted at the beginning of May 2020 on teachers, professional assistants and principals of primary and secondary schools, and on the realization of the distance learning process, it was determined that the main problems faced by teachers during the transition to the implementation of the educational process through distance learning were as follows:

Table 4: What were the main problems faced by teachers during the transition to implementing the educational process through distance learning? (The respondents could choose up to 5 answers) (survey of the Institute for the Improvement of Education, 2020)

The school does not implement the educational process through distance learning	1.0%
There were no problems	4.8%
Time management and organization	17.2%
Increased workload	51.6%
Insufficient support or guidance from the school	5.3%
Creating content for the educational process through distance learning	8.9%
Assessment of student progress	41.5%
Process of adapting activities and content to educational ones	15.8%
Support for students with developmental disabilities or disabilities	16.3%
Student motivation and involvement	20.0%
Involvement of students from marginalized groups	23.2%
Involvement of undisciplined students	25.4%
Low level of digital competences of students	33.5%
Low level of digital competence of teachers	25.3%
Communication with parents / legal representatives	13.3%
Communication with students	18.3%
Availability of resources and technology to students	52.3%
Availability of resources and technology to teachers	37.4%

Based on this research conducted by the above-mentioned Institute, it can be determined that the main problem faced by teachers during online teaching was a substantially increased workload. Teaching materials were not available to them on the Internet, so they had to adapt their plans and preparations to the conditions, make special presentations and reports, which required much more time than it was needed in normal school conditions. A large number of teachers had a problem with the availability of resources and technology, and a low level of digital competence was also noticeable, from which we can conclude that many teachers had problems with online teaching. A certain number of teachers and students did not have the technical requirements needed for teaching, as well as the necessary experience for working on platforms, but they had to be trained in a short period of time. In this regard, a question arises whether these changes will later affect the change of the educational system or whether everything will return to the old ways. As Anderson says, "schools can be revolutionized by this experience" (Anderson, 30 March 2020, Quartz). But that remains for us to determine after the end of the pandemic.

Table 5 contains the research results regarding the problems and difficulties encountered by the students during sociology classes during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 5: Problems and difficulties encountered by the students during sociology classes during the pandemic

	Frequency	Percentage
Invalid	5	0.9%
Lack of IT literacy	32	5.5%
Bad Internet connection	232	39.5%
I had no technical requirements	69	11.8%
I had no interest in following online classes	150	25.6%
Second: no difficulties	82	14.0%
We didn't have online classes	11	1.9%
In total	581	99.0%
Missing	6	1.0%
In total	587	100.0%

Out of 587 surveyed students, poor Internet connection stood out as the biggest problem faced by students during online classes, and as many as 232 respondents, or 39.5%, answered that they had a problem with Internet connection. The next problem listed by the students was the lack of interest in following online classes, with as many as 150 respondents, or 25.6%, indicating in the background the poor quality of the classes and the lack of interest of the teachers to try to raise the quality of their classes and to bring the material and teaching materials closer to the students and better explain the subject. Furthermore, 11.8% or 69 respondents stated that they had no technical conditions for attending classes, which meant no free space, no information technology for attending classes, and frequent power outages, most often encountered by the students in the territory of Kosovo and Metohija. With 32 students, or 5.5%, stating that they were insufficiently IT literate, this is a good indicator showing that the majority of young people are IT literate, since, according to the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, "frequency of Internet use - individuals, 81.2 % in the last three months" (Statistical Office, 2021), which would further indicate that out of 18.8% of the population not using the Internet or not being computer literate, only 5.5% are young people under the age of 18. In addition, 82 respondents, or 14.0%, stated that they did not have any problems when studying online.

CONCLUSION

This paper presents the results of research on students about the teaching of sociology in secondary vocational schools during the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to significant changes worldwide in all areas, not only in education. What is certain is that this pandemic has had a significant impact on increasing many inequalities that exist in the world. Occasional closing of schools, interruptions and sudden changes in the way of teaching in the educational process have led to unfathomable consequences. The

pandemic has had a negative impact on all areas, except for the fields of information technology, which began to develop rapidly from the very beginning of the pandemic. In the technological world, there was a sudden development of various distance learning software and platforms to facilitate teachers to improve the quality of teaching. It should be added here that the increased development of various software has helped, not only the educational process, but also numerous other sectors so that the entire economies of the countries would not collapse. "The challenge is to reduce, as much as possible, the negative impact that this pandemic has on learning and schooling and to build an experience that will help students progress faster in the learning process" (Stepanović, 2020: 192).

Despite numerous advantages of online teaching, such as scientific and technical progress that represents mutual cooperation between science and education, then strengthening of teacher competences, greater solidarity among colleagues, saving time because students did not have to travel to school and could have more independent work, which allows faster progress, safety, always available materials, classes can be followed from home and many other advantages can be listed. However, the conclusion is that online classes cannot be realized in the Republic of Serbia in the way feasible in economically stronger and more modern countries. Economically more developed countries have higher investments in education. According to OECD results, "around 60% of the surveyed countries have already increased their education budget in response to the pandemic" (OECD, 2020). In these areas, schools are still not ready to fully adapt to online teaching, largely because the socio-economic status of both students and teachers is at an unenviable level. A large number of the respondents, as it can be seen in the above results, have technical, Internet and network problems. The teachers, as well as the students have a low level of digital competence; a large number of the students have no interest in further training and cooperation with teachers. In general, it can be concluded that the majority of students showed a negative attitude towards online education, pointing out that the main problems they encountered during the learning process were lack of interest, lack of concentration, difficult communication, lack of motivation for further progress, sitting in front of the computer for a long time. Moreover, there was reduced interaction between teachers and students, as well as the stress of whether they would be able to do all the assigned tasks independently, etc. This is exactly why it is "necessary for the survival of the school as an institution to follow innovations and trends in science and technology, because education plays a great role in the development of innovation, creativity, critical thinking, emotionality, professionalism, etc." (Jakovljević, 2022: 252).

However, if we look at the whole picture from the point of view that in the educational process education is in the second place in the overall educational process, and the health of students and teachers comes first, then we should still conclude that online and any kind of teaching is better than risking the lives of our youngest citizens.

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