

## PANDEMIC CHALLENGES IN PRIMARY SCHOOL MANAGEMENT IN SERBIA

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**Abstract.** *The principal, as a leader in the school, significantly affects the realization of teaching and learning and also student achievements. Having in mind the responsibility and importance of the principal in primary school, in this paper we discuss influence of Covid-19 pandemic onto the process of managing and organizing the teaching and learning process. Since school principals are the important link between decision makers and those who implement educational policy, we analyzed recommendations to school, sent by Serbian educational authorities in 2019/20 and 2020/21 school year. We developed a questionnaire for the purpose of this study and we conducted a research with participation of 264 primary school principals. This research contains two analyzes: qualitative data analysis (content analysis) and quantitative statistical analysis (descriptive statistical analysis). The COVID-measures, introduced by educational authorities were explored using the method of content analysis. The research instrument was a questionnaire for primary school principals, and it was used for descriptive statistics. The results show that the education authorities reacted quickly and appropriate and that they organized distance learning as a combination of TV teaching, online educational platforms and independent work of students. In accordance with the level of internet coverage and number of digital devices, this combined approach has made teaching available to the largest number of students. The principals' experiences show that it is necessary to improve the digital competencies and resources of teachers, in order that students reach their full potential, during distance learning.*

**Key words:** *school principals, pandemics, school leadership, distance learning*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The scope of the school principals' work in Serbia is combined of professional-pedagogical activities and administrative-technical tasks that are regulated by educational laws and regulations. The professional-pedagogical aspect of the principal's work (Leithwood, 1982) requires some leadership skills. From the other side, business-administrative duties require a lot of manager's skills (Abdikadir, 2013; Srdic, 2015). A successful director is a good combination of a leader as a visionary and a manager as a practitioner, who will implement that vision (Randjelovic et al. 2021). Since the start of Covid-19 pandemic, the whole education system and each particular school principal came into a completely new and challenging situation (Randjelovic et al. 2020; Russel et al. 2020). The role of primary school principals was especially demanding, because they should organize direct attendance of younger students during the 2020/21 school year. In addition, the pandemic brought a new request to the principals - provision of socio-psychological support to the students and especially to their families (Randjelovic et al. 2020, 2021, 2022).

"The bylaw on standards of competences of educational institutions principals" (Official Gazette of RS 2013) prescribes the criteria, necessary for ensuring the quality of principals' work. Those standards refer to:

1. leading the educational process in the school,
2. planning, organizing and control of the school,
3. monitoring and improving the employee's engagement,
4. development of cooperation with parents/guardians, governing board, trade unions and local community,
5. financial and administrative management in school,
6. ensuring the legal aspect in school.

Each of those standards have indicators of the level of implemented activities and defined tasks. During the pandemic period, one of the most important indicators for the principal's work the providing the healthy and safe conditions for learning and development of students (Lindqvist 2019).

In accordance with governments Decision on declaring a state of emergency ("Official Gazette of RS", No. 29 of March 15, 2020.) and the Decision on measures during a state of emergency ("Official Gazette of RS", No. 32/2020), due to the Covid-19 virus pandemic, the Government of the Republic of Serbia decided to suspend classes in primary schools during the spring of the 2019/20 school year. The Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development (MoESTD) of the Republic of Serbia organized distance learning and thus enabled the continuity of the formal education process. Distance learning overcomes spatial, temporal, social, economic, and other limiting factors in the educational process. Since March 16, 2020, distance learning for primary school students has been supported at the national level with broadcast of television classes on channels 2 and 3 of the RTS Public Service and on the RTS Planet Internet portal (<https://mojaskola.rtsplaneta.rs/list/582/osnovna-skola-202021>). On the multimedia internet platform RTS Planet, all interested students, parents and teachers could subsequently view the teaching content they missed. During the spring of 2020, portal "My School"<sup>1</sup> for distance learning was organized by the MoESTD, and television lessons were supported by appropriate interactive tests of knowledge. MoESTD also organized classes for students who decided to follow education on their mother

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<sup>1</sup> <https://mojaskola.rtsplaneta.rs/list/582/osnovna-skola-202021>

language (8 languages: Croatian, Bosnian, Albanian, Hungarian, Slovak, Romanian, Ruthenian and Bulgarian).

After the suspension of the emergency state, during the school year 2020/21, teaching took place in accordance with the epidemiological situation, through distance learning and through a hybrid model (a combination of direct schoolwork and distance learning). Guidelines for the organization of online and hybrid teaching are given and recommended in official document "Online and hybrid teaching - long-term aspirations and short-term guidelines" (IEQE, 2020) published by the Institute for the Evaluation of the Quality of Education and Upbringing (IEQE)<sup>2</sup>.

Since school principals are a link between creators of educational policies and implementations in schools, we investigated the educational measures adopted since the beginning of the pandemic and the principals experience about the organization and implementation of distance learning. (Harris, 2020; Harris, et al., 2020).

## 2. METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH

The subject of this research is to examine the effects of distance learning in Serbian primary during the spring 2020 and during school year 2020/21 year, onto principal's role and work. We discussed bylaws and recommendations of MoESTD to primary schools that have been adopted during that period.

The main goal of the empirical research was to examine the experience, opinions, and attitudes of primary school principals during the implementation of distance learning (spring 2020 and 2020/21 school year). In accordance with the aim of the research, we set the following tasks: a) to determine the opinion of school principals about the response of the Serbian education system to the Covid-19 crisis; b) to identify the opinion of school principals about the circumstances regarding implementation of distance learning; c) to identify the opinion of school principals about the circumstances that hindered the implementation of distance learning.

After considering the measures and recommendations of the educational authorities, regarding distance learning, we set the following research questions:

1. do school principals consider that response of the Serbian education system was efficient?
2. do school principals consider that low digital competencies of students influenced the implementation of distance learning?
3. do school principals consider that low digital competencies of teachers influenced the implementation of distance learning?
4. do school principals consider that limited digital resources of students have influenced the implementation of distance learning?
5. do school principals consider that limited digital resources of teachers have influenced the implementation of distance learning?
6. do school principals consider that use of different online platforms at the level of one school had a negative impact on the implementation of distance learning.

The research sample includes 264 primary school principals from the territory of the Republic of Serbia. The research instrument was created in the form of an online

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<sup>2</sup> <https://ceo.edu.rs/wpcontent/uploads/2021/03/SMERNICE%D0%9OnlajnHibridnaPripremaNastava.pdf>

questionnaire. The first part of the questionnaire referred to the collection of socio-demographic data on primary school principals. The second part of the questionnaire contained questions about the organization and implementation of distance learning in primary school. The principals commented about the factors that made it difficult, and which contributed to the quality and efficiency of the implementation of distance learning.

In this research, we performed and presented two analyzes: qualitative data analysis (content analysis) and quantitative statistical analysis (descriptive statistical analysis). The educational authorities' measures were examined by the method of content analysis, and the research instrument (questionnaire) was processed with descriptive statistics.

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### 3.1. Qualitative analysis

Since March 16, 2020, classes were broadcasted via television channels and internet platforms, for the very first time in Serbia. Numerous free digital educational tools, applications, and social networks (Zoom, Skype, Microsoft Teams, Google Meet, Google Classroom, Facebook, Messenger, Viber, WhatsApp, e-mail) were available to teachers and students, also. So, it was necessary that teachers communicate almost daily with their students and parents, and students had to send homework and other materials to their teachers, almost daily. For introducing hybrid learning method for 2020/21 school year, a numerous bylaws and recommendations were adopted by MoESTD (Randjelovic, et al. 2020). The adopted acts were the basis for organizing, planning, and programming the overall educational work in schools in difficult conditions.

Since there should not be more than 15 students in the classrooms, each school has prepared a special schedule for division of classes, what was a completely new challenge for school management. Anyway, flexible recommendations enabled the school management to organize educational process, in accordance with local conditions and circumstances. New bylaw about evaluation and marking has been adopted<sup>3</sup>, especially for situations when student is not able to attend classes in the school.

An integral part of those instructions and recommendations from MoESTD were new obligations and responsibilities of the school principal. The principal is responsible for legal aspect and for the successful performance of all other activities in the school. He/she is responsible for students and for employees, in accordance with the law; principal is in close communication with all structures of educational process and monitors working conditions in school, safety and protection of students and employees. Social isolation and fear of disease, uncertainly, affected all participants in the educational process, and indirectly made principals job more complicated. However, manager's role of school principals is now much more difficult than in pre-Covid period.

After analyzing the measures and recommendations of the educational authorities, regarding the organization and implementation of distance learning, teaching was implemented through national television and online educational platforms, in accordance with the available resources. So, we can confirm the hypothesis that the response of the Serbian education system was effective.

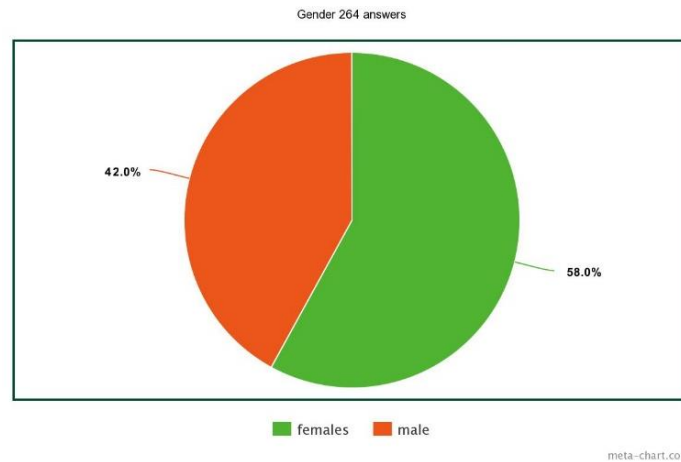
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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.pravno-informacioni-sistem.rs/SIGlasnikPortal/eli/rep/sgrs/ministarstva/pravilnik/2020/109/2/reg>

### 3.2. Quantitative analysis

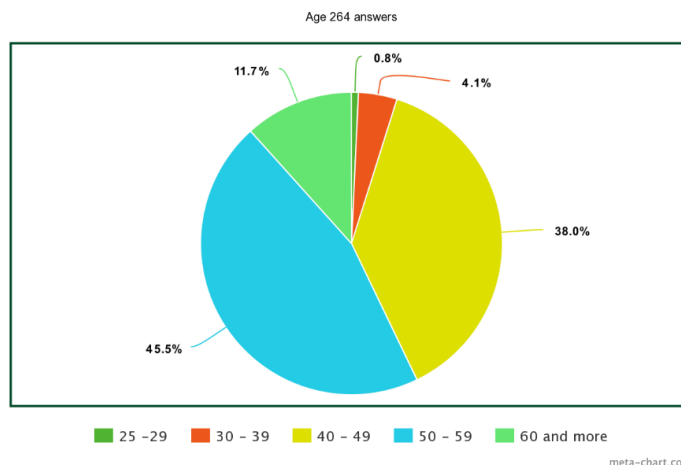
In this section we discuss and implement qualitative analysis about opinion of school principals regarding various topics in school management during COVID-19 period.

Out of the total number of surveyed directors, 153 were female and 111 males. A larger number of female principals is expected because the female gender has been, for decades, predominant in education. However, according to the data of the Republic Bureau of Statistics, at the beginning of the school year 2020/21, 38 648 female teachers and 13 984 male teachers worked in primary schools in 2006, and this explains situation that we have had a significantly larger number of female principals (Graph 1).



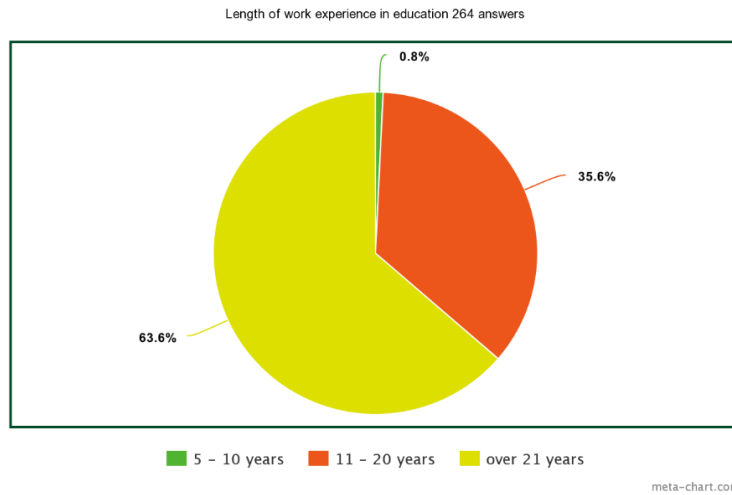
**Graph 1** Gender structure of the sample

Most of primary school principals are between 50 and 59 years old (121 respondents), and slightly fewer principals are between 40 and 49 years old (101 respondents), shown on Graph 2.



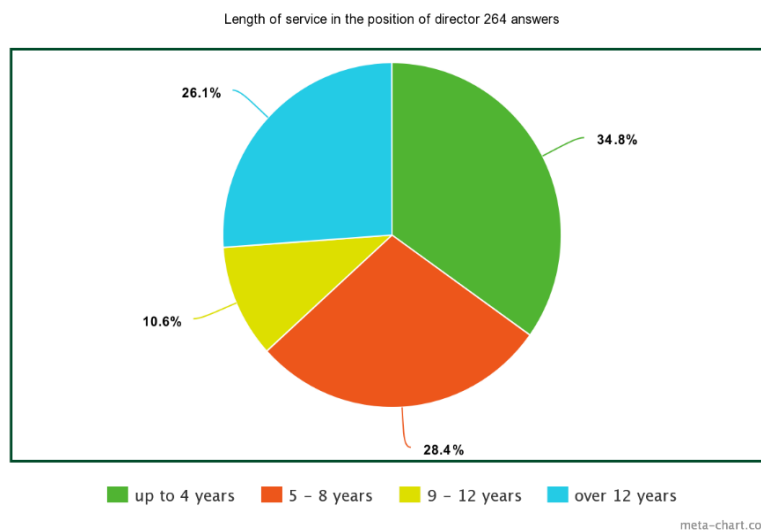
**Graph 2** Age structure of the sample

Most primary school principals have been working in education for over 21 years (168 respondents). They are followed by directors with work experience of 11 to 20 years (94 respondents). There are only 2 two principals that have education experience from 5 to 10 years, shown on Graph 3.



**Graph 3** Sample structure by years of experience in education

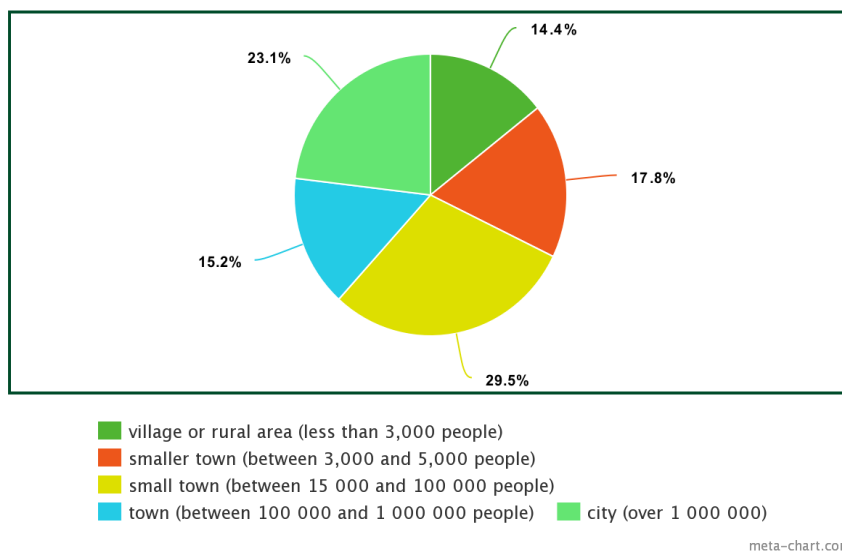
Particularly interesting are the data on the length of service in the position of director. As many as 69 principals have been managing the school for more than 12 years, i.e. three terms. Seventy-five principals are in the position of leaders in primary school for two terms, that is, between 5 and 8 years. However, the largest number of directors is in the first term (92 respondents) (see Graph 4).



**Graph 4** Sample structure by principals' experience

Graph 5 shows that the sample of schools is well distributed, from urban to rural schools. In general, in order to achieve the availability and equity of primary education, it is important to optimize the network of schools by number and geographical distribution.

Which of the following statements best describes the environment in which your school is located? 264 answers



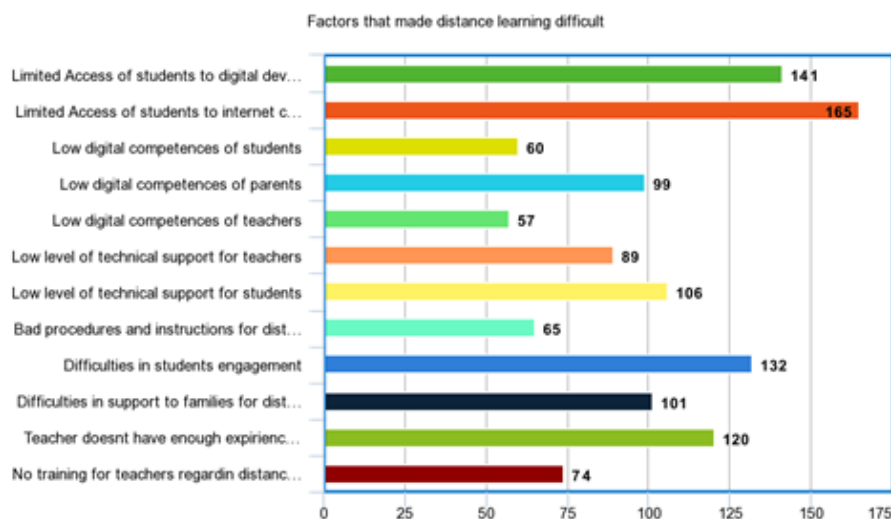
**Graph 5** Socio-economic structure of the schools

Participants answered 12 questions regarding factors that hindered work during distance learning:

1. Do Your students have limited access to digital devices?
2. Do Your students have limited access to internet connection?
3. Do Your students have low digital competences?
4. Do parents of Your students have low digital competences?
5. Do Your teachers have low digital competences?
6. Do Your teachers have low level of technical support?
7. Do Your students have low level of technical support?
8. How are instructions and procedures for distance learning process?
9. Did You feel some difficulties in students engagement?
10. Are there any difficulties regarding support for families, during distance learning?
11. Do the teachers have enough experience?
12. Were there any training for teachers, regarding distance learning?

Teachers did not use any literature, neither any other studies, while answering.

All the listed aggravating circumstances, the respondents could mark or not mark them. The absolute numbers of the respondents, who noticed the factors that hindered the implementation of distance learning is given in the following Graph 6.



**Graph 6** Factors that hindered distance learning

Most of participants emphasized, as an aggravating circumstance, the limited access of students to the Internet and digital devices, which answered our research question 3). Then, there are the difficulties in engaging students during distance learning. A significant number of participants mentioned a lack of insufficient teachers experience for the implementation of distance learning. It is interesting to note that 89 principals believe that there was no adequate technical support for teachers, and at the same time 106 principals think that the lack of technical support for teachers was an additional difficulty. The Institute for the Improvement of Education (IIE) has created a digital support service for all educational institutions and educators<sup>4</sup>. Also, the Institute for the Quality and Evaluation of Education (IEQE) created and organized the training "Online and hybrid teaching in a digitally competent institution"<sup>5</sup>. The low digital competencies of students and teachers were pointed out by approximately a quarter of the respondents, which gives the answer to our research question 4). During distance learning, the role of parents in the process of teaching and learning has become even more demanding. Only a third of the principals believe that the digital competencies of parents are low, which shows that a larger number of students had adequate support at home as well.

Participants answered questions regarding factors that facilitated work during distance learning. The percentage of respondents who noticed the factors that facilitated the implementation of distance learning is given in the following Graph 7.

The largest number of primary school principals mentioned horizontal cooperation between teachers regarding the use of digital technologies and the creation of resources, as a mitigating circumstance. An important aspect of principal's role is communication with parents/guardians of students and more than 50% participants had no difficulties. 120 principals believe that their schools had access to well-organized resources, so all

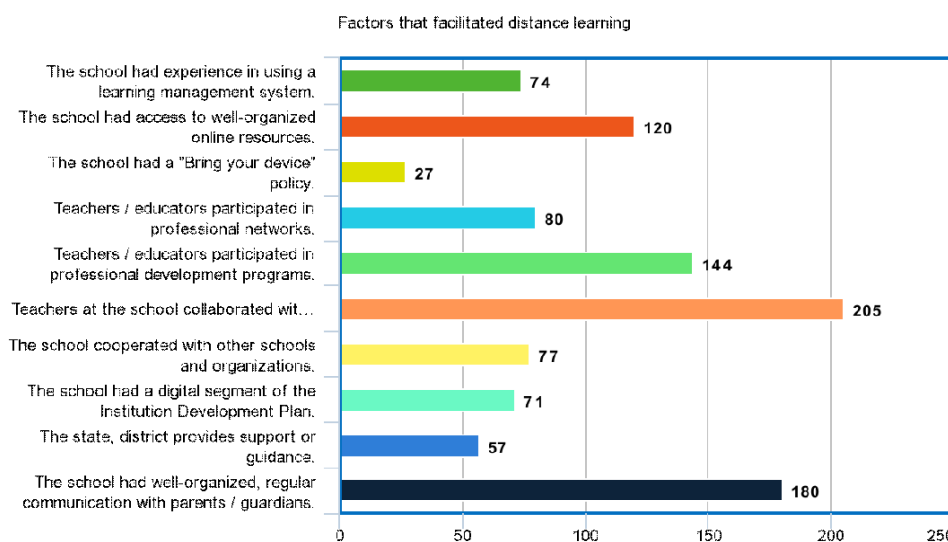
<sup>4</sup> <https://www.portal.edu.rs/podrska/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://ceo.edu.rs/poziv-za-ucheshne-u-pilot-obuci>



school capacities for successful implementation of distance learning were in the function of preserving the quality of education. If there are students/teacher's with no technical capabilities, the school could adjust the method of distance learning for those students/teachers<sup>6</sup>.

Participants had the opportunity to write their additional opinions or experiences in school management, during the Covid-19 pandemic in the form of a shorter or longer essay response. Approximately a quarter of the respondents (58 directors) presented their views and experiences. The obtained material was analyzed, using combination of deductive and inductive thematic analysis. Overlapping topics have been identified and a categorization matrix (Table 1) has been created.



**Graph 7** Factors that facilitated the implementation of distance learning

**Table 1** Categorization matrix

Category 1. Digital resources for implementation of distance learning	Category 2. Digital competencies, necessary for implementation of distance learning	Category 3. Support and motivation for work, teaching and learning
Laptop for each teacher	Different levels of digital competences	Support to families with many children
Tablet/laptop for each student	Online trainings for digital competences	Difficult marking
Stabile internet connection	Low digital competencies of students	Engagement of teachers and school leadership
One school – One online learning platform	Low digital competencies of teachers	Communication with parents and students during whole day
Support for buying equipment for distance learning	Low digital competences of parents	Raising awareness and responsibility of employees in school

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.mpn.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Uputstvo-za-osnovne-skole-za-sajt-27-11-2020.pdf>

Most important suggestion in category 1 is that there should be only one learning platform per school that gives the answer to research question 6). There is also an important opinion (not in categorization matrix) about students with special needs, during distance learning. Distance learning was a special challenge for those children, and the experiences emphasized importance of inclusion, as well as balancing between the academic and social needs of students and parents.

It is confirmed that the role of parents in distance teaching is greater in relation to direct teaching because it was necessary to organize time and space for work, as well as the accompanying infrastructure. Parents, in addition to teachers, provided additional support in learning, as well as support in the safe use of the Internet and compliance with the rules of conduct in cyberspace.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Since the beginning of the pandemic, the principals of primary schools had to organize and implement distance learning in accordance with the capacities of their schools. School management is challenging and demanding, and especially during pandemic. Leaders in school should possess special qualities, including the ability to communicate enthusiasm and vision, a positive outlook, intuitive insight, and emotional competency (Ashkanasy, 2000). Our research has shown that primary school principals have responded to the challenges of online teaching and learning and preserved the continuity of educational work.

In new circumstances, school principals had to empower their teachers to use learning platforms. They had to be initiators of broader social actions and activities that would satisfy IT needs, mobile operators and other involved stakeholders, with influence on distance learning.

Contributions of this paper are given as follows: the cooperation between teachers within the school, but also between teachers at different schools, has proven to be a factor that contributes to online teaching. Teacher cooperation encourages all participants in the educational process to work better and to achieve better results. The results of our research show that primary school principals had important role in supporting teachers networking. In addition to existing support programs, support is needed for teachers and students in the form of training that would empower them to rationally use online time.

It is interesting to note that none of participants mentioned the possibility to learn by their own speed (independent of other students), as an advantage of distance learning. Temporal and spatial flexibility are essential features of distance learning.

Also, learning through free online platforms contributed to raising the digital competencies of students, teachers, and parents. Distance learning also brought some savings, regarding travel costs from home to school and back. Distance learning will be actual in future period, too. Organization and implementation of learning process in those circumstances will remain permanent task for school principals.

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## **PANDEMIJSKI IZAZOVI U UPRAVLJANJU OSNOVNIM ŠKOLAMA U SRBIJI**

*Direktor škole, kao lider, značajno utiče na proces realizacije nastave i učenja kao i na sama postignuća učenika. Imajući u vidu odgovornost i značaj direktora u osnovnoj školi, u ovom radu istražujemo uticaj pandemije kovida 19 na proces upravljanja i organizacije obrazovno-nastavnog procesa. Kako su direktori škola važna veza između donosilaca odluka i onih koji implementiraju obrazovne politike, analizirali smo preporuke školama poslate od strane obrazovnih autoriteta u Srbiji u 2019/20 i 2020/21 školskoj godini. U svrhu ovog istraživanja razvili smo upitnik i sproveli istraživanje u kome su učestvovala 264 direktora osnovnih škola. Ovo istraživanje sastojalo se iz dve analize: kvalitativne analize podataka (analize sadržaja) i kvantitativne statističke analize (deskriptivne statističke analize). Istražene su COVID-mere, uvedene od strane obrazovnih autoriteta, primenom metode analize sadržaja. Istraživački instrument je bio upitnik za direktore osnovnih škola i korišćen je za deskriptivnu analizu. Rezultati pokazuju da su obrazovni autoriteti reagovali brzo i na odgovajući način i da su organizovali nastavu na daljinu kao kombinaciju nastave putem televizije, onlajn obrazovnih platformi i samostalnog rada učenika. U skladu sa nivoom pokrivenosti internetom i brojem digitalnih uređaja, ovaj kombinovani pristup je učinio nastavu i učenje dostupnim najvećem mogućem broju učenika. Iskustva direktora pokazuju da je neophodno podići digitalne kompetencije i resurse nastavnika kako bi i učenici tokom nastave na daljinu ostvarili svoj pun potencijal.*

**Ključne reči:** *direktori škola, pandemija, rukovodjenje školom, nastava na daljinu*