

Teachers' Perceived Competence in Meeting Students' Emotional Needs during COVID-19

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Abstract

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, students and teachers found themselves in an unprecedented situation where they faced both academic and psychosocial problems. In our study, we focused on some teacher characteristics that predict their perceived competence in meeting students' emotional needs during distance learning (PSCEN-DL) and thus contribute to students' well-being. In a sample of 645 Slovenian compulsory basic education teachers, the results of the regression analysis showed that teachers' resilience and their beliefs about the importance of focusing on psychosocial relationships when returning to school explained one-fourth of the variance in their PCSEN-DL. Results from a subsample of class teachers ($n = 375$) who were categorised into two extreme groups (low and high) in terms of their PCSEN-DL showed that teachers with high PCSEN-DL focused more on supporting, encouraging and relaxing students. Some practical implications about the importance of developing PCSEN in teachers are discussed.

Keywords: COVID-19, distance learning, students' psychosocial well-being, resilience, empathy

Introduction

For a decade, the OECD and UNESCO have emphasized the need to prepare students for schooling/education in the VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous) world (Hadar et al., 2020). When the COVID-19 pandemic was declared, the situation became a prime example of schooling in the VUCA world – schools were closed overnight, a distance learning system was quickly established and questions emerged about how to quickly train teachers and students for such instruction, along with content issues of how to explain the material well, monitor student knowledge, motivate them, etc., while not knowing how long the pandemic would last.

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Teachers' Support for Students during Distance Learning

In addition to academic issues, distance learning also caused problems in the area of psychosocial well-being of students and teachers.

The construct of psychosocial well-being refers to emotional or psychological and social or collective well-being (Martikainen, 2002). According to Davis (2019), it corresponds to the quality of life as a whole, as it consists of emotional, social and physical components. First, emotional well-being refers to the ability to cope with stress while managing negative emotions; second, social well-being refers to the ability to communicate with others, build meaningful relationships, and have a social support network that reduces loneliness; and third, physical well-being is the ability to lead a healthy life with physical activity to stay in physical shape.

The uncertainty of how long the lockdown would last and how it might affect the future of learning, along with daily exposure to various news on television and the Internet, caused anxiety and feelings of fear and panic among students (Buzzi et al., 2020; Ellis et al., 2020). In addition, being away from school for several months caused both students and teachers to feel like they were missing school (Hebebcı et al., 2020; Rupnik Vec et al., 2020). Research shows that this impacted children's and young people's daily functioning, resulting in sleep and eating problems, feelings of helplessness, work overload, pressure and a sense of lack of control (Ellis et al., 2020; Hadar et al., 2020). Teachers also experienced psychological distress, mostly due to changes in workload, working in stressful circumstances, and fear of infection (Kerč et al., 2021).

Research shows that even before the pandemic, teacher relational competence (including sensitivity and responsiveness; Aspelin, 2019), manifested in teacher support, is significantly related to student achievement (Marzano et al., 2003) and subjective well-being, i.e., how they assess and emotionally experience their school life (Tian et al., 2016). However, during COVID-19 distance learning, teacher support became even more important to students. Sensitivity and responsiveness to student needs during a pandemic suggest that teachers consider student well-being important regardless of the circumstances (Suldo et al., 2009).

From the perspective of self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), teacher support in distance learning included the following three dimensions: supporting student autonomy (e.g., by providing appropriate learning tasks), supporting structure (with clear expectations for learning and behaviour), and supporting student involvement (by encouraging participation and offering warmth, affection, and understanding to students). Research suggests that the latter has the greatest impact on students' psychosocial well-being – reducing anxiety and depression and increasing hope (e.g., Skinner et al., 2008) and was also the subject of our study. Tardy (1985) in his model of social support also writes about teacher support – informational, instrumental and emotional support for a student. The first two types of support are mainly related to the learning domain, as they involve giving advice

and information related to the learning process and tasks, and providing resources for carrying out these tasks; emotional support involves trust and empathy. However, during distance learning, the latter was particularly important as students were struggling. Therefore, teachers had to be attentive to students' feelings and provide them with emotional support.

Students' and teachers' social and emotional competencies, as well as their resilience, are therefore of great importance for dealing with the situation of distance learning in COVID-19. They are highlighted, for example, in the OECD Visions for Education 2030 (Laukkonen et al., 2019). These competencies are crucial for teachers – not only for the development of students' social and emotional competencies, behaviour and learning outcomes, but also for their own well-being (Castillo-Gualda et al., 2019; Kozina et al., 2020). However, some research shows that in distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers themselves lacked well-developed coping skills (Hadar et al., 2020), which would consequently help them by developing these skills in students and by creating a positive virtual environment for effective distance learning and ensuring students' psychosocial well-being.

Teacher's Factors in Promoting Students' Psychosocial Well-Being

Teachers sought to ensure the psychosocial well-being of students during distance learning. However, in order to do so, they must themselves be socioemotionally competent, resilient, empathetic, and believe that maintaining social relationships with students is important. Socioemotional competence of the teacher means that the teacher is aware of the student's feelings, responds appropriately to the student's needs, and reflects on the quality of their interactions (Rimm-Kaufmann et al., 2003). The acquisition of social and emotional competence in school is known through the concept of social and emotional learning, which systematically develops and exemplifies five broad, interrelated areas of competence: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making (CASEL, 2021).

Resilience refers to a teacher's ability to cope with stressful situations, respond positively, and adapt successfully to novel or extraordinary, persistently difficult, or significant changes in circumstances (Masten & Obradović, 2006). Research shows that teachers who perceive themselves as more resilient also considered that they were more competent in developing resilience in children/students (Bouillet et al., 2014). Teachers' resilience development is enhanced by their developed socio-emotional skills such as emotional regulation, caring and listening, relationship building and advocacy (Pennington et al., 2021). Teachers themselves reported moderately high resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic (Kerč et al., 2021). However, research shows that teachers' individual protective factors under

challenging circumstances are altruistic motives, high self-efficacy, and peer and student support (Beltman et al., 2011).

Teacher empathy indicates the degree to which the teacher seeks to better understand students' personal and social situations, takes an interest in students, their positive and negative emotions, and shows them he cares through his behaviour (Meyers et al., 2019). This definition includes the cognitive, affective, and behavioural aspects. The cognitive aspect refers to the teacher's ability to put himself in the students' shoes and try to understand them (e.g., that they do not have a computer that would enable distance learning; that they do not have anyone at home to help them); the affective aspect, which refers to understanding the students' feelings and having compassion for them in difficult situations of distance learning (e.g., empathy for students who are stressed due to the inability to make a Zoom connection); and behavioural aspect – when showing and expressing understanding of students' problems while maintaining learning requirements (e.g., extending the submission time for a student who was unable to submit an assignment in an online classroom due to technical difficulties, but not exempting him or her from completing the assignment). Research shows that more empathetic teachers create conditions for better student performance, which is also reported by students themselves (Mikkonen et al., 2015). At the same time, a meta-analysis by Cornelius-White (2007) shows that teacher's empathy is among the strongest predictors of positive student outcomes, both academic and psychosocial.

Teachers' beliefs about the importance of their relationships with students and also among students themselves, consistent with social cognitive models (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980; Bandura, 1997), influence teachers' behaviour in seeking this goal. Closing schools for over six months (three months in the spring and three and a half months in the fall), distance learning, and lack of social contact with peers caused students stress and many emotional problems. Teachers with stronger interpersonal skills tried to help students during regular class community hours and through additional contact with conversation and games, providing relief for students during the stressful time of the pandemic.

Aims of the Study

In our study, we attempted to answer two research questions.

The first question was:

- i) How teachers of compulsory basic education perceive their competence to meet students' emotional needs in school and during distance learning, and
- ii) How do some of teachers' characteristics, such as resilience, empathy, and their beliefs about the importance of focusing on relationships with students when returning to school, predict this perceived competence in meeting students' emotional needs during distance learning (PCSEN-DL)?

In class teachers, we examined their attempts to promote students' psychosocial well-being within regular class community hours¹ and through additional contact with them. Indeed, class teachers are bound by the document Program Guidelines for the work of the Departmental Teachers' Association and the Departmental Community (Kalin et al., 2005), which states that the work of the class teacher is, among other things, "to create such a school culture in which learning efficiency is balanced with quality interpersonal relationships between all those involved in the educational process" (pp. 4–5).

The second research question was:

Are there differences in the number of contacts with students (in regular class community hours and additional contact) and focus on psychosocial aspects between teachers of high and low perceived competence in meeting students' emotional needs during distance learning (PCSEN-DL)? We assumed that more competent teachers would have more contact with students (both through regular class community hours and additional contacts) and that they would pay more attention to the psychosocial aspect of these contacts.

Method

Participants

In the first part of the study, our sample included 645 teachers of compulsory basic education from 4th to 9th grade (91.6% women) from 21 schools from all statistical regions of Slovenia. In the second part of the study, the sample comprised only class teachers ($n = 375$; 94.1% women).

Instruments

The following instruments were used in our study: resilience and empathy questionnaires and a questionnaire about contacts with students during distance learning.

We measured teachers' resilience using the Slovenian adaptation of the Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale (CD-RISC 10) (Kavčič et al., 2021). In the 10-item questionnaire, teachers answered on a 5-point scale (1 – *not at all*, 5 – *almost always*) about how they deal with stressful situations, obstacles, and changes (e.g., *I can deal with whatever comes.*). Validation of the instrument on our sample of teachers (PCA,

¹ Regular class community hours are on the curriculum for students in 4th-9th grade once every 14 days for 1 school hour. In these meetings, students meet with their class teacher and talk about their problems (related to learning, with relationships) and try to solve them together.

Varimax rotation) confirmed the one-factor structure of the questionnaire with 73.11% explained variance and high reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = .96$).

To measure empathy, we used two IRI scales (Interpersonal Relational Index; Davis, 1983) with 7 items each – *Perspective taking*, which measures the cognitive aspect of empathy (e.g., *Sometimes I find it hard to see things from the point of view of another person.*), and the *Empathic Concern* to measure the emotional aspect of empathy (e.g., *When I see someone being exploited, I usually feel like I want to protect them*). Teachers answered on a 5-point Likert scale (1 – *does not describe me well*, 5 – *describes me very well*). Validation of the instrument on a sample of our teachers (PCA, Varimax rotation) showed, after elimination of 3 items, a two-factor structure explaining 78.46% variance: *Perspective taking* scale (5 items, $\alpha = .94$) and *Empathic concern* (6 items, $\alpha = .93$). Since the intercorrelation between the two factors was very high ($r = .86$), we decided to combine the two factors and present them as a general empathy factor, as recommended by Pulos et al. (2004) ($\alpha = .96$).

We also collected data from all teachers on their perceived competence to meet students' emotional needs during distance learning (PCSEN-DL: *I feel competent enough to attend to students' emotional needs during distance learning.*), perceived competence to meet students' emotional needs in school (PCSEN-S: *I feel competent enough to attend to students' emotional needs when they return to school.*); and on teachers' beliefs about the need to focus more on the social and emotional aspects of school than on learning when they return to school (RS-beliefs: *When students return to school, we will need to focus more on social relationships and emotional support to students than on knowledge.*). Teachers expressed their level of agreement with all three items on a 5-point scale: 1 – *strongly disagree*, 5 – *strongly agree*.

The questionnaire for class teachers about contact with students during distance learning contained 5 questions. The first question was about whether they had regular class community hours with students during distance learning (yes/no). If the class teachers answered "yes", they were asked the second question, namely about the content of the conversations during these meetings. Teachers were able to select one or more out of four activities that were listed (yes/no) – two activities related to the academic aspect of distance learning (talking about the process of distance learning from an organizational point of view – where they get the material from and in terms of content – about assignments, knowledge, grades) and two activities about the psychosocial aspect of distance learning (talking about things that are happening in their lives right now and talking about or implementing activities to relax, support and encourage students). In the next two questions, we asked them if they had additional meetings with students – outside of class and regular class community hours (yes/no), and what the content of the meetings was if the answer was "yes". The activities were the same as described above. The last question referred to the frequency of additional meetings. Class teachers rated how often they have been in contact with students in their classrooms during distance learning when they were not teaching them and did not have regular class community hours (1 – *once a month*; 2 – *once every two weeks*; 3 – *once a week*; 4 – *two or more times a week*; 5 – *every day*).

Procedure and Data Analysis

Data collection by teachers took place via the Ika web application (2021) in January and the first half of February 2021, at which time teachers had been teaching students remotely for three to three and a half months because schools were closed. Prior to data collection, we obtained consent from the Ethics Commission of the Faculty of Arts at the University of Ljubljana that the research met ethical criteria and standards. Before completing the questionnaire, teachers also gave informed consent to participate in the online survey.

We used linear regression analysis to predict teachers' PCSEN-DL with teachers' characteristics. Differences in the number of regular class community hours, additional contacts, and content of conversations with students between each teacher group according to PCSEN-DL were calculated using contingency table analysis, significance of differences was determined using the χ^2 -test, and effect sizes were determined using Cramer's *V*. As a guide, we used values in the range of .07 to .21 as a small effect; values in the range of .21 to .35 as a medium effect; and values greater than .35 as a large effect (Cohen, 1988).

Results

Predictors of Teachers' Perceived Competence in Meeting Students' Emotional Needs

First, we present the answers to the first research question – how competent do teachers feel in meeting students' emotional needs during distance learning and to what extent some of the teachers' characteristics – their resilience, empathy, and beliefs about the importance of focusing on social relationships with students and offering them emotional support when returning to school – predict their PCSEN-DL.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Matrix (N = 642)

	<i>M (SD)</i>	1	2	3	4	5
1 – PCSEN-DL	2.95 (1.09)	-				
2 – PCSEN-S	3.52 (1.09)	.69**	-			
3 – Resilience	3.49 (0.92)	.46**	.48**	-		
4 – Empathy	3.81 (0.95)	.40**	.50**	.77**	-	
5 – RS-beliefs	3.55 (1.03)	.38**	.48**	.50**	.50**	.48**

Note. PCSEN-DL – *I feel competent enough to attend to students' emotional needs during distance learning*; PCSEN-S – *I feel competent enough to attend to students' emotional needs when they return to school*; RS-beliefs – *teacher beliefs about the importance of focusing on social relationships with students and offering them emotional support when they return to school*. ***p* < .01.

Teachers report a moderate level of PCSEN both at distance learning and after returning to school. However, the differences between PCSEN-DL and PCSEN-S are significant ($t(641) = 17.11$; $p < .001$), and teachers report significantly lower PCSEN when working with students in distance learning. Therefore, only PCSEN-DL was included in further analyses. On average, teachers describe themselves as empathic and they believe they should focus more on relationships and emotional support for students than on the learning aspect when returning to school (Table 1).

Table 2

Regression Analysis Predicting Teachers' Perceived Competence for Meeting Students' Emotional Needs during Distance Learning (PCSEN-DL)

	B	95% CI	β	t	p
Resilience	0.37	[0.25; 0.50]	.32	5.77***	.00
Empathy	0.07	[-0.06; 0.20]	.06	1.04	.29
RS-beliefs	0.20	[0.12; 0.29]	.19	4.69***	.00

$R = .49$; $R^2 = .24$; $\Delta R = .25$

Note. RS-beliefs – teacher beliefs about the importance of focusing on social relationships with students and offering them emotional support when they return to school; β – standardized β coefficient; R – multiple correlation coefficient, R^2 – determinant coefficient; ΔR – multiple correlation coefficient change, CI – confidence interval for B . *** $p < .001$.

The regression model shows that we can explain up to one-fourth of the differences in teachers' PCSEN-DL with the proposed teachers' characteristics. Teachers' resilience and belief in the importance of focusing on social relationships with students and providing them with emotional support when they return to school emerged as important predictors (Table 2).

In the next part, we present the results concerning the second research question. We investigated whether there were differences between two extreme groups of class teachers according to their PCSEN-DL in terms of contacts with students (Table 3) and the content of these contacts (Tables 4 and 5). We formed two groups of class teachers according to their PCSEN-DL: low competent (score lower than $M - 1SD$); and highly competent class teachers (score higher than $M + 1SD$).

Table 3

Class Teachers' Perceived Competence for Meeting Students' Emotional Needs during Distance Learning in Relation to Contacts with Students

	Groups of teachers f (%)		Differences between groups of teachers χ^2 (V^c)
	1 ^a	2 ^b	1-2
Regular class community hours	13 (68.4)	90 (79.6)	1.19 (.09)
Additional contacts ^d	13 (68.4)	86 (76.1)	0.51 (.06)

Note. ^a1 – low PCSEN-DL ($n = 29$); ^b2 – high PCSEN-DL ($n = 103$); ^cCramer's V ; ^dcontacts outside of class and regular class community hours.

There were no significant differences between teacher groups in terms of PCSEN-DL in the number of teachers who reported having regular class community hours and additional contact with students (Table 3).

Table 4

Differences between Groups of Teachers According to the Perceived Competence for Meeting Students' Emotional Needs during Distance Learning and the Content of Regular Class Community Hours

	Conversations during regular class community hours about...	Groups of teachers <i>f</i> (%)		Differences between groups of teachers χ^2 (<i>V</i> ^c)
		1 ^a	2 ^b	1-2
Academic aspect	... the course of distance learning.	12 (92.3)	79 (87.8)	0.23 (.05)
	... learning content, knowledge, assignments.	7 (53.8)	33 (36.7)	1.41 (.12)
Psychosocial aspect	... students' current life events.	12 (92.3)	83 (92.2)	0.00 (.00)
	... supporting, encouraging, relaxing students.	10 (76.9)	88 (97.8)	10.70** (.32)

Note. ^a1 – low PCSEN-DL (*n* = 29); ^b2 – high PCSEN-DL (*n* = 103); ^cCramer's *V*. ***p* < .01.

With regard to the academic aspect of conversations during regular class community hours, the results in Table 4 show that there were no significant differences between teachers with low and high PCSEN-DL. However, there were differences between groups of teachers with low and high PCSEN-DL within the psychosocial aspect. Teachers with high PCSEN-DL supported, encouraged, and relaxed students more than teachers with low PCSEN-DL. The effect size of the difference was medium.

Table 5

Differences between Groups of Teachers According to the Perceived Competence for Meeting Students' Emotional Needs during Distance Learning and the Content of Additional Contact

	Conversations during additional contact...	Groups of teachers <i>f</i> (%)		Differences between groups of teachers χ^2 (<i>V</i> ^c)
		1 ^a	2 ^b	1-2
Academic aspect	... the course of distance learning.	10 (76.9)	44 (51.8)	2.88 (.17)
	... learning content, knowledge, assignments.	1 (7.7)	10 (11.8)	0.19 (.04)
Psychosocial aspect	... students' current life events.	9 (69.2)	67 (78.8)	0.60 (.08)
	... supporting, encouraging, relaxing students.	10 (76.9)	73 (84.9)	0.53 (.07)

Note. ^a1 – low PCSEN (*n* = 29); ^b2 – high PCSEN (*n* = 103); ^cCramer's *V*. **p* < .05.

Table 5 shows no significant differences in the number of conversations within the academic or psychosocial aspect between groups of teachers with low and high PCSEN-DL. Nevertheless, teachers who perceived themselves as highly competent in meeting students' needs were more likely to talk to students about what was currently going on in their lives and support, encourage, and relax them than teachers with low PCSEN-DL.

Since a trend emerged in Tables 4 and 5 that teachers who rated themselves as highly competent in meeting students' emotional needs during distance learning talked more about psychosocial aspects of students' well-being, we looked more closely at the number of low and high PCSEN-DL teachers in terms of frequency of additional contact with students. The results are shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1

The Relationship between High and Low PCSEN-DL Teachers and the Frequency of Additional Contact with Students

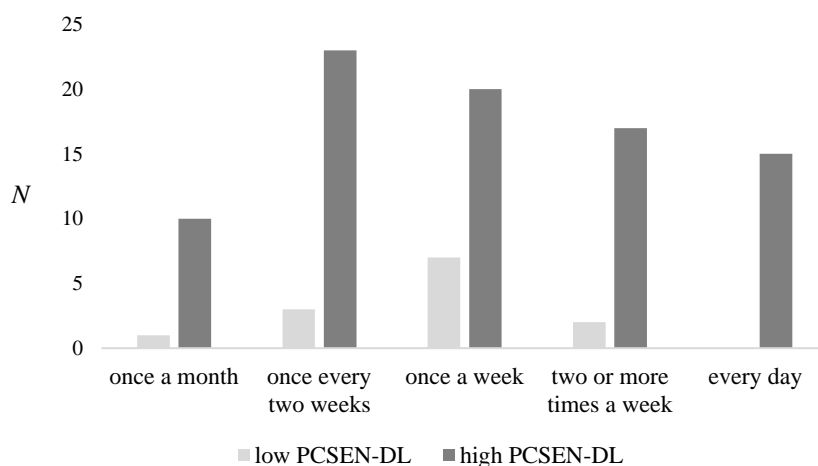


Figure 1 shows that teachers with high PCSEN-DL had more frequent additional contact than teachers with low PCSEN-DL.

Discussion

During distance learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it was important not only to pursue academic goals but also to maintain students' psychosocial well-being, which affects students' motivation/engagement with school work in general.

In the first part of our study, we sought to determine how teachers perceive their competence to meet students' emotional needs during distance learning and how some of their characteristics – resilience, empathy, and beliefs about the importance

of focusing on social relationships with students and providing them with emotional support when returning to school – predict the above-mentioned perceived competence. We found that teachers reported moderate levels of PCSEN-DL and PCSEN-S, although the differences between these two variables were significant (Table 1). This indicates that teachers do not perceive themselves as highly competent to meet students' emotional needs even when they are with students at school, let alone in a distance learning situation due to a pandemic. Along with the students, they found themselves in an unprecedented situation – schools were closed, they had to switch to ICT-based teaching, with many teachers and (especially younger) students having poorly developed digital literacy skills, along with the closure of public life and the cessation of all social contact outside the home.

For many involved, all this was compounded by concerns about achieving the prescribed learning standards and, because of the pandemic, about possible infection of themselves and their relatives. All of this caused stress for both students and teachers (Ellis et al., 2020; Rupnik Vec et al., 2020). At the same time, teachers found themselves in a situation where they had to guide and support students in achieving learning goals, take care of their decreasing motivation for distance learning, support them emotionally, take care of at least minimal social contact between students from individual classes, and reduce students' feelings of loneliness (Buzzi et al., 2020; Ristić Dedić, 2020).

Because of all these tasks teachers had to face during the pandemic, and especially because of the concern for students' psychosocial well-being, some teachers' characteristics that otherwise influence perceived competence in ensuring students' emotional well-being have become even more important, namely resilience, empathy, and beliefs about the importance of focusing on psychosocial relationships. The results of the regression analysis (Table 2) showed that the model with the above predictors explained one-fourth of the PCSEN-DL among teachers. Resilience and beliefs about the importance of focusing on psychosocial relationships when returning to school (.32 and .19, respectively) emerged as significant predictors. The results were to be expected, as those teachers who perceived themselves as more competent in dealing with challenges and problems found it easier to adapt to the new situation during a pandemic and to recover more quickly from the transition to distance learning. As a result, they were able to focus their energy more quickly not only on the learning process and the pursuit of learning goals, but also on providing emotional and social support and encouragement to students.

Teachers' belief in the importance of focusing on social relationships with students and providing them with emotional support is one of the key factors that influence their behaviour or agency (Korthagen, 2004; Reeves & Le Mare, 2017). Teachers who believe that their mission is not only to teach students but also to care for a safe and stimulating learning environment, relationships, and students' psychosocial well-being are likely to have paid more attention to this task before the pandemic and also to have improved the relevant competencies through their

professional development. However, research shows that high-quality relationships between students themselves and between students and teachers are moderate predictors of student learning achievement (e.g., meta-analysis by Hattie, 2009) and that they increase students' psychosocial well-being, e.g., with less peer bullying (Košir et al., 2018).

Pečjak et al. (2021) found that teachers attended to students' psychosocial well-being either by organizing more collaborative learning in the e-classroom (e.g. by videoconferences) or by organizing additional contact with students outside the classroom.

Therefore, the goal of the second part of our study was to determine how many contacts with students' class teachers with different PCSEN-DL had during regular class community hours and additional contacts outside class and what was the content of these contacts. The results showed (Table 3) that, in general, the majority of teachers had regular class community hours with students (from 68.4 to 79.6%), which is not surprising since these meetings are included in the students' curriculum and thus are part of the class teachers' duty. Although the differences were not significant, the results showed that more class teachers with high PCSEN-DL than teachers with low PCSEN-DL had these hours. A very large proportion of class teachers, regardless of PCSEN-DL, had additional contact with students during the pandemic when schools were closed (from 68.4 to 76.1%). Although the differences between the two groups of teachers were not significant, teachers with high PCSEN-DL had more frequent additional contact with students (Figure 1). This suggests that class teachers were attempting to meet the emotional needs of students also outside of their regular duties and to alleviate students' current distress caused by distance learning.

Regarding the content of the contacts, we found that teachers' conversations with students during regular class community hours and during additional contacts were more related to the psychosocial than to the learning aspects of distance learning. During these contacts, several teachers talked to students about the current events in their lives – about the difficulties and problems they were trying to solve, thus making them feel that others cared about them. They also encouraged them to make additional contacts through ICT and motivated them to perceive the (pandemic) situation as something temporary which will pass soon. At the same time, they organized various creative activities for the students, such as relaxation and calming exercises (e.g. mindfulness exercises and progressive muscle relaxation), social games, drawing, etc. Through these activities, they tried to help students express negative feelings such as anger, fear, and sadness in a positive way.

However, there were significant differences between the PCSEN-DL groups of class teachers in how much attention they paid to the psychosocial aspect of distance learning. Namely, significant differences were found between low and high PCSEN-DL groups of class teachers in regular class community hours regarding the content of conversations. Significantly fewer low PCSEN-DL teachers supported, relaxed,

and encouraged students compared to high PCSEN-DL class teachers. Up to 97% of high PCSEN-DL class teachers did this with students during regular class community hours (Table 4), and 85% of these teachers also did so during additional contact (Table 5). We find that this type of ongoing teacher conversation with students is a good way to release minor day-to-day tensions, stresses, and frustrations, whether related to learning or relationships. It is a type of ongoing mental hygiene that prevents the accumulation of frustrations and poorer emotional and social well-being (Davis, 2019).

In the discussions about the academic aspect of distance learning, we found that the class teachers talked more about the logistics of distance learning both in the regular class community hours and in additional contacts (suitable conditions for distance learning such as ICT equipment, space, Internet connection, possible help from family members) than about materials and knowledge. The result was to be expected, as students with content problems related to subjects were likely to turn mainly to teachers of those subjects rather than to class teachers.

Conclusions, Practical Implications and Study Limitations

We can conclude that teachers with high PCSEN-DL are better equipped to overcome the challenges of distance learning during the pandemic. Indeed, a greater proportion of teachers with high PCSEN-DL were found to address the psychosocial aspects of this schooling in conversations with students. During regular class community hours and additional contacts, these teachers processed students' feelings of panic and anxiety, reduced their feelings of tension, and made them feel that teachers and classmates cared about their problems. By strengthening the students' sense of acceptance (emotional and social), belonging to the school or class, and giving them hope to persevere in learning despite challenging conditions, they took care of students' psychosocial well-being.

Beteille et al. (2021) write about three types of support for teachers to teach more effectively during COVID-19: Resilience Support, Instructional Support, and Technical Support. Our research addresses the first area – resilience support, as it has shown that this teachers' characteristic is the strongest predictor of their PCSEN-DL, and in addition to resilience, teachers' beliefs about the importance of relationships also during distance learning. From a preventive perspective, teachers should systematically develop their PCSEN. This is provided by social-emotional learning programs (CASEL, 2021) and by mindfulness-based interventions (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Although a meta-analysis by Gomez-Olmedo et al. (2020) shows that mindfulness practices have a weak effect, this could be an effective method to positively influence three outcomes of socio-emotional competencies: emotional regulation, empathy and social connectedness, and resilience. In the VUCA world of education, and especially in the pandemic, these competencies have become at least as important as digital competencies.

Our study has some limitations that must be taken into account when interpreting the results. Namely, we used self-assessments that could lead to biased responses – it is possible that teachers gave more socially desirable answers. Also, only 29 teachers were in the low PCSEN-DL group, which prevented us from using some of the more advanced methods of data analysis. We, therefore, used a simple graphical representation of the differences between PCSEN-DL and the PCSEN-S groups in terms of the frequency of their contact with students. Finally, the main construct – PCSEN – was based on only one item on distance learning and one on learning in school. The construct of teachers' belief in the importance of focusing on social relationships with students and providing them with emotional support when they return to school was based on only one item. Therefore, it would be beneficial to gather information from a larger number of teachers in future studies, to include students' perspectives on teachers' competence in meeting their emotional needs, and to create a more reliable measure of PCSEN.

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Percipirana kompetentnost nastavnika u zadovoljavanju emocionalnih potreba učenika tijekom pandemije uzrokovane bolešću COVID-19

Sažetak

Zbog pandemije uzorkovane bolešću COVID-19 učenici i nastavnici našli su se u izvanrednoj situaciji u kojoj su se suočili i s akademskim i sa psihosocijalnim problemima. U našem smo se istraživanju usredotočili na neke karakteristike nastavnika koje predviđaju njihovu percipiranu kompetenciju u zadovoljavanju emocionalnih potreba učenika tijekom učenja na daljinu (PCSEN-DL) i tako doprinose dobrobiti učenika. Na uzorku od 645 slovenskih učitelja obveznoga osnovnog obrazovanja rezultati regresijske analize pokazali su da otpornost učitelja i njihova uvjerenja o važnosti fokusiranja na psihosocijalne odnose prilikom povratka u školu objašnjavaju jednu četvrtinu varijance PCSEN-DL-a. Rezultati poduzorka učitelja razredne nastave ($n = 375$) koji su bili kategorizirani u dvije ekstremne skupine (nizak i visok PCSEN-DL) pokazali su da su se učitelji s visokim PCSEN-DL-om više usredotočili na podršku, poticanje i opuštanje učenika. U radu se raspravlja i o praktičnim implikacijama važnosti razvoja PCSEN-a kod učitelja.

Ključne riječi: COVID-19, učenje na daljinu, psihosocijalna dobrobit učenika, otpornost, empatija

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