



TOGETHER AGAIN  
P R O J E C T

# Task 1.1 Common Report on the State of the Art

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## 1. Introduction

The return to school after the COVID19 pandemic is an important moment in the difficult context of the world and the challenges that are emerging. Countries are in a period of decision-making on how to work with the new issues that students are facing socially and personally. These decisions are usually made by state or national governments, often in collaboration with local governments.

After the period of confinement, it can be observed that students are dealing with emotions that shake them since the pandemic began. In this sense, it is necessary that public policies aim at the return to normality, including education policies and integrating a cross-cutting approach to children and adolescents, with the restoration of rights and promoting specific measures.

The return to school has been challenging for many reasons. From a mental health point of view, young people have had to face a return to school after several months without social contact with their environment, dealing with a new scenario with new rules and limitations, such as the use of masks and social distancing. In these conditions, students, their families and teachers may have found school to be a "risky" environment, with a certain insecurity or fear. On the other hand, however, a return to the classroom is essential for the stability of family, social and working life and the economic performance of the country.

For this reason, TOGETHER AGAIN project addresses the need for schools to coordinate the return to face-to-face education and the recovery of interpersonal relationships at a critical time for the protagonist.

The project consortium consists of two types of organisations: training providers and secondary schools from four different countries (Bulgaria, Spain, Poland and Slovakia).

In this point of the project an analysis will be carried out by the four countries of the consortium to identify the importance of relearning interpersonal relationships and fostering psychosocial development in the post-Covid 19 era for the future generations, focusing on secondary school students (12-16 years old) and teachers. The objective will be to establish the current state and develop practical techniques that will allow explaining, contextualising and better understanding the benefits of the development and mastery of these skills in the target group.

## 2. The impact of COVID-19 on the education system

The closure of schools around the world in response to the COVID19 pandemic represents an unprecedented threat to the education, protection and well-being of children, which had an impact on the development of students and schools in general. The following is a summary of the impact on the education systems in each country participating in the project (BG, SP, PO, SL).

### CLOSING DATES



Educational system in Europe was never prepared for any kind of teaching of distance learning. The different educational systems were not adapted to this format, for this reason an adaptation to the online education model had to be made, as can be seen in the participating European countries.

**In Bulgaria** according to data from the national sociological institute in Bulgaria at the time of the start of Covid 19 pandemic, as consequences:

- There were 1 million and 200 thousand children of school age.
- The majority of Bulgarian teachers and students had never led or participated in an online lesson using a digital platform before March 2020. And its start was neither easy nor seamless for teachers, students and parents.
- After the first lockdown started all schools and universities remained closed and the academic year ended online.

- The presence of students was allowed only for carrying out essential activities that it was impossible to carry out these activities remotely in an electronic environment and/or presence in school was required.
- This had an impact on the over 700,000 pre-school and school aged children and their parents.
- The most severely affected by school closures were students from families living in poverty, and children whose parents have been unemployed long-term and/or economically inactive.

The pandemic lockdown **in Spain** took place between 15 March and 21 June 2020. The information from the INJUVE COVID19 survey provides the following information after the first wave of the pandemic:

#### Access to internet and educational resources

- 86% of young people aged 15-29 reported having access to the necessary resources to be able to participate in the learning activities. 7.8% claimed to have some restrictions.
- 3.5% said they had limited access.
- 2.1% denied having the means to be able to follow the teaching on a regular basis.
- Similarly, 80% admitted to having followed the online lessons without any difficulties.,

#### Students' self-perception of knowledge acquired compared to a regular year.

- The modal value ranged from 60% to 79% of students' learning achievement compared to a regular year.
- At least one in three young people in Spain perceived to have lost knowledge during the confinement.
- The higher education students, with 47% obtaining more than 80%, despite their 24% at the other end of the scale. The situation appears to be more even for secondary and post-secondary education. The young people's position with regard to following the lessons is, in general, optimistic.

In general, students did not find the teaching too problematic, even if they admitted to have learned less. In the case of Spain, **educational inequalities have been reproduced in a manner similar to that observed in other countries.**

**In Poland** there are a lot of important dates and facts connected to the education system during the pandemic (Ministerstwo Edukacji i Nauki, 2020, 2021). On March 12, 2020 (first days of the pandemic in Poland), school activities were

temporarily suspended. And on March 25, schools restarted teaching in remote form. Until the end of the school year, education was carried out remotely.

- From October 24, upper primary schools (classes IV-VIII) and secondary schools started distance learning.
- From May 17, upper primary schools (classes IV-VIII) and secondary schools conducted teaching in a hybrid form.
- From May 31, all the schools returned to stationary learning.
- From December 20, the schools started distance learning (does not apply to: kindergartens, sociotherapy centres, psycho-pedagogical counselling centres).
- From February 21, 2022, the schools returned to stationary learning.

All the levels of education were affected by the pandemic. [Almost 5 million students from Polish schools were affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. There were two main lockdowns in school education](#) (March-June 2020, October 2020-May 2021, December 2021-February 2022).

**Slovakia** has been severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Several restriction mechanisms were implemented:

- Secondary schools have been closed, while e-learning has been introduced at all universities, and state exams were conducted online.
- Students in secondary schools had to be educated in distance form for 6 months, in some regions even longer.
- Young people could start school in September 2021. Then again, the widespread opening of schools, taking into account the current regional pandemic situation, began in mid-January 2022.
- Each week of school closures represents about 22 hours of face-to-face compulsory instruction time at school (lower secondary school – general orientation), that is to say 2.7% of annual compulsory instruction time.
- Schools were forced to replace this time in class with online learning and homeschooling, in most cases facilitated by teachers and parents.

### 3. Situation in Secondary schools after Covid-19

The disruption of educational learning has had a significant effect on the students' lives, learning, and well-being. Once school doors have reopened, different measures have been integrated into school life and these ones are mentioned by the partners:



➤ ***The benefits/consequences to return to normality after months of confinement and distance from face-to-face classes***

In **Bulgaria**, after the third lockdown of schools in October 2021, testing of children was introduced at the insistence of health authorities as a condition for the students to go back in class. The students are back in class from Monday, February 28, 2022 and testing is made once at the beginning of the school week. There are about 5% who are still not attending schools and studying on an individual plan at a home based education.

In order to analyse the current situation better at this moment AYPB 4th April asked its members and supporters to scan the opinion of high school teachers unofficially and anonymously. More than 80% of the asked teachers agreed, that after the lockdowns most of their students shows the same specifics:

- Attention deficiency.
- Apathy or extremely low activity when discussing or working in groups, lack of willingness to communicate and inability to adequately express.
- Lower verbal and nonverbal skills, inability to connect with others.
- Poorer vocabulary.
- Internal resistance to group activities and sports /as if they had lost the habit.
- A loss of interest in a digitised learning process /as if they were oversaturated of digital stimuli from different kinds.

- Values and more material thinking. Children have spent time on Tik Tok and social networks, soaking up more shopping and gaming strategies to fill time than developing, educational and creative ones.

In **Spain** an important date to understand the evolution of the school year 2020-2021 is 27 August 2020. This was the date of a multi-sectoral conference on education and health. At this meeting it was agreed to establish 23 actions and 5 recommendations for schools to follow throughout the 2020-2021 academic year.

In addition, the Spanish Government approved in June the agreement on "Prevention, hygiene and health promotion measures against COVID-19 for schools in the academic year 2020-2021". The organisation of the centre and its operation throughout the 2020-2021 academic year was developed.

The uncertainty has characterised the behaviour of all concerned as they plan for and start the 2020-2021 school year. The face-to-face teaching and learning organisations have been more positive than expected, but [this uncertainty caused significant stress](#) than ever before [for teachers, students and families](#), in which we are all committed to the security measures included in each school's COVID protocol.

From **Poland** the situation is very dynamic. Alternating stages of distance and stationary learning make it difficult to organise the learning process. It also [affected teacher-student and student-student relations](#). Digital tools will never replace direct contact – teachers agree on this point. From February 21, 2022 students came back to school. The schools are functioning as before pandemic (in compliance with the sanitary regime). There are several reports and recommendations from Poland's government for returning to school:

- *Ministry of Education and Science, Ministry of Health and Main Sanitary Inspectorate guidelines for primary and secondary schools.*
- *How to help students return to stationary learning at school? A guide for teachers and school principals (2021)*
- A government program of psychological and pedagogical support.

In **Slovakia** at school level, strict epidemiological measures were taken to return to full-time education to ensure that the school environment is safe for children and that the disease does not spread. Immediately after the students returned to school:

- There was a session in each class with a school psychologist and individual counselling for children who had lost a relative.

- Teachers / assistants / special educators paid increased attention to the unusual expressions and behaviour of students.
- Morning classes with class teachers took place every day.
- During the first days after returning to school, a special concept of education was created, the aim of which was to enable students a smooth transition between working online and full-time work in class.
- On the first days, a special schedule was created, which allowed children to adapt to their stay at school and among their peers. It sensitively reflected the difficulties and fears that the children may have brought with them when they returned to school.
- The students worked mainly in a playful way, there were various discussions, the pressure to manage learning, testing and other situations that could be stressful for the children at that time was relieved.

#### 4. What challenges have emerged after the coronavirus lockdown?

All countries have stated that after covid-19 confinement, a number of challenges have emerged that significantly affect students and the education community in general:



## Bulgaria

The case of Bulgaria includes the lack of efficiency of technology, the difficulty for them to understand the concepts taught, and online learning causes social isolation and results in students not developing the necessary communication skills. Factors that determine how well a pupil's education performs in online learning include individual learning styles, learning environments, and the level of parental involvement. A very strong and important thing is the support from the family. Two key challenges are identified in this regard:

- Interaction between teachers.
- Interaction between teachers and parents and commitment of the school Community.

## Spain

In response to all these consequences of the pandemic led the Spanish government to implement a series of extraordinary measures and resources to tackle the pandemic and its effects on education, including the COVID-19 fund, school canteen grants and aid for the "Educa en digital" programme, among others. Behind this apparently normal situation guided by the implementation of health measures, the educational community has to face new challenges such as:

- The emotional situation of students after the experience.
- The lack of motivation of some students in the face of uncertainty.
- What we are experiencing forces them to develop the new skills and abilities needed to cope with this new direction.

## Poland

It highlights a great need for psycho-pedagogical support for students. Students have a lot of learning gaps after remote learning but they also have a lot of mental problems that can make the learning difficult. So a high priority should be given to psychological support and helping students return to stationary learning without stress and fear.

Other challenges which result from the research:

- Learning gaps – 39% of students admit that they have learning gaps after remote learning.

- Using new technologies – most of the students claim that using new technologies (e.g. online quizzes) should be continued in stationary learning.
- Learning disproportions – some students spent the time of online education effectively, other groups of students could not find motivation to learn by themselves and they have a lot of learning gaps.
- A great need of psychological support for students and teachers. 25% of students and 50% of teachers declare the need of psychological help. There is a great necessity to increase the resources of school specialists.
- A lot of students see the weaknesses of the school system and its incompatibility to the contemporary world.

### **Slovakia**

A major problem after returning to school was the re-adaptation to the regular school regime. Adherence to the regime during distance learning was significantly disrupted, children did not do normal activities at the recommended times.

After returning to school, this manifested itself in increased fatigue and passivity, they often suffered from headaches and dizziness. This was also exacerbated by increased noise and more stimuli than at home.

- Children were again forced to look for internal and external motivation to work, to work in a team, which was very difficult for many and caused them serious problems, which manifested themselves in worsened marks and more frequent conflicts.
- Long stay at home, social isolation, significantly higher time spent online have also manifested a significantly higher incidence of anxiety, depressive states, which often require the intervention of a specialist / pedo-psychiatrist.
- Aggressive behaviour is also emerging.

## 5. The impact on students and teachers.

### Relationships between them

All partner countries have indicated that mental well-being and the lack of socialisation are the most serious problems related to the COVID-19 pandemic among students and teachers.

**Bulgaria** highlights [the mental impact on students](#), such as “symptoms of nervous exhaustion, headaches, sleep problems and other signs of distress were reported in 84% of children educated online. Among school attendees this percentage and the intensity of the symptoms is lower - 78%”, and among high school students who are not already enthusiastic about going to school. Another aspect was [the need for support from adults and lack of direct communication](#) damages the educational process.

**Spain** states “these problems have a significant [impact on children and adolescents who are socio-economically disadvantaged and people with disabilities](#), with the main consequence being an increase in the [education gap](#). Moreover, this educational disadvantage can be difficult to compensate for with students losing motivation, losing habits and daily life, and breaking social ties. In this sense, the lack of socialisation and the impossibility of carrying out activities can also affect students' physical and emotional health.”.

In **Poland**, according to books and reports the conclusions show the difficulties faced by students, teachers and parents during the lockdown, 65,3% of teachers and almost 50% of students claim to be [mentally much worse than before the pandemic](#). While 50% of students feel that their relationships with peers were better before the pandemic than during it. Another problem is that students spent too much time in front of the screen during the pandemic. It could be the reason for their negative emotions and feeling lost. In this line, [teachers after the pandemic are exhausted and they confess that they need psychological support](#).

**Slovakia** states “currently [the relations between students and teachers are at a very good level](#)”. Teachers tried to help as much as possible during the distance learning and after returning to school. It also had a positive effect on the relationship between teachers and students. For secondary school students, the return is more difficult because “they are more suspicious, they have more mistrust, there are more conflicts, especially in the online space. There is a lower degree of cohesion in the class groups, a disruption of some long-term friendships”. Teachers also try to talk to students about other topics. In this sense, students and teachers increasingly use the opportunity to visit a school psychologist, they turn to him or her with their problems, they need to talk.

## 6. Consequences of Covid-19 in secondary school

### Bulgaria

The negative consequences for the children dramatically increased. Below are one of the main problems that appeared as a result from the long social distance. [The social isolation and lack of contact with friends and classmates has a negative impact on the overall psychological state of children.](#)

- Fear of illness and death
- A sense of helplessness to protect their loved ones and fear of losing loved ones
- Fear of separation from close and caring people due to quarantine
- Fear of who will take care of children or the elderly if their relatives are quarantined or ill

### Spain

Mobility and contact between students and teachers has been limited or even avoided in classrooms. [The consequences of these decisions to ensure personal attendance and avoid contagion have varied at the pedagogical level.](#) First, after the development of the COVID protocol, teachers had to modify their teaching programmes to consider three possible scenarios, the face-to-face scenario, the blended scenario (in the case of partial containment), or the distance scenario (in the case of a new containment of the education system). In this reorganisation of teaching programmes, [teachers have had to make concessions in terms of methodology, and in some cases in terms of objectives and content.](#)

The report "The school year 2020-2021 in Spain during the pandemic" (2021) found that some informants pointed out [the difficulty of abandoning or carrying out work in collaborative or cooperative groups.](#) In this sense, teaching has been more teacher-centred in order to avoid contact and contagion among students. In short, interpersonal distance has led to more personal learning with little or no group work.

### Poland

Several things are recommended to care for the health and mental health of students and teachers after returning to school according to the Ministry of Education and Science:

- Each school was asked to prepare and explain to students the rules of functioning during the pandemic.

- Schoolwork should be organised in a way that will allow people to be kept at a distance, especially in common areas. The gathering of students should be limited.
- School principals should make the wearing of masks compulsory and students should strictly follow this obligation.
- Schools will be equipped with personal protection measures.
- It is recommended to encourage students, parents and teachers to do the vaccination.

## Slovakia

According to survey, implemented by Centrum vzdelávacích analýz / Educational Analysis Centre (2021), the effects of the pandemic on the mental health and well-being of teachers are as follows:

- Anxiety has increased slightly compared to the pre-pandemic period. On a 100-point scale (0 = no anxiety, 100 = highest anxiety), teachers rated the anxiety experienced during the pandemic at 25 points, during the pre-pandemic period at 18 points (median).
- Teachers most often experienced a deterioration in well-being (46%) and mental health (41%), and about a third in physical health (35%) and the socio-economic situation (32%).
- 78% of teachers agreed that their teaching during the pandemic was very exhausting (51% had mostly agreed and 27% strongly agreed). About a fifth also agreed that they no longer enjoyed learning after a pandemic (21%) and that they were considering leaving the profession after this experience (18%).
- More than half of teachers would welcome some form of mental health support, mostly activities to strengthen the teaching team (33%) and training in stress management tools (20%).

## 7. Selected good practices

- **The educational systems have been developing programmes, online resources and projects adapting to the Covid-19 in school curriculum.**

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, which affected the entire world, what was done by each educational country was an important source of knowledge and for the exchange of good practices.

In **Bulgaria** parents have proposed "[children's green corridors](#)" as a measure to address some of the effects of social exclusion, which allow children to visit parks and playgrounds at certain times, and an online platform with developed lessons - "[Ucha.se](#)" ("I learn"), opened its resources for free access. The Bulgarian Association of Information Technologies together with the Ministry of Education and Science organised a competition for teachers "[Digital Innovators in Education](#)", whose main goal was to identify good practices and approaches in distance learning for students from 1st to 12th grade, to highlight digital innovators among teachers and students, and to promote distance learning.

On the other hand, many daily centres, support telephone lines, and specialists offered free of charge psychological support and consultations. And international and national museums, educational platforms and governmental and nongovernmental centres had free online educational tours for children, pupils and youths.

In **Spain** the public entity Red.es and the MP developed a programme "[Educa en digital](#)", which had a budget for the purchase of 500,000 mobile devices every quarter in 2020 and another 250,000 mobile devices by 2021. Also, the Ministry of Education and Vocational Training provided [20,000 Movistar mobile lines](#) by sending 40 GB SIM cards per month per line to high school and vocational training students with difficulties to continue their education telematically during the state of alarm, thanks to the collaboration of Telefónica, Cisco and IBM. Another example was INTEF, who designed the website "[Resources for online learning](#)", with the aim of offering teachers, families and students information on different types of resources (materials, training courses, platforms, tools, etc.) that are available for online use.

In **Poland** from the beginning of the pandemic Polish public television (TVP) broadcasted [educational programmes and video lessons](#) for students at different stages of education. The program "School with TVP" consisted of more than 1600 lessons.

The Ministry of Education and Science proposed 4 programs that support students and teachers after the pandemic: “WF z AWF” (Physical education with Academy of Physical Education), [programme of psycho-pedagogical support](#) for students and teachers during the pandemic, [additional support lessons](#) – schools received money for organising additional classes to consolidate knowledge and skills among students, and “[Dobrze widzieć](#)” (See well), There are also a lot of local initiatives organised by the schools. Teachers organise support groups, workshops and events to integrate students and take care of their mental and physical health.

In **Slovakia** several support platforms have been set up to support learning opportunities during and after the pandemic, such as [Magic teachers online](#), [Microsoft Teams](#) for online education, [ImO](#), [ZMÚDRI](#) (BE WISE); DIGITAL COALITION (DIGITÁLNA KOALÍCIA) and the international platform for online education – [eTWINNING](#).

## 8. Personal reflection on the topic

The impact of the current COVID-19 crisis on education and the resulting effects is unquestionable. It is clear from the reports and reflection of each project partner that we will see the in-depth effects of closed schools in the future. In **Bulgaria**, statistics conducted by the Ministry of Education show that behavioural and emotional engagement decreases dramatically among secondary school students during and just after the COVID 19 pandemic.

As the education system is entering an era of change, we can talk about isolation, the emotions that accompany it, and how everyone treats it differently. For this reason, it is important to prevent the effects of isolation and actions should be taken at several levels.

**Spain** states “mental health problems and psychological stress have increased significantly. Lack of relationship with other adolescents, problems related to inactivity and frustration, and problems related to excessive use of screens during confinement”. It is important to highlight the importance of focusing on mental health”. **Poland** states “The online learning has shown the gaps in Polish education according to using new technologies and adjusting methodology to the needs of contemporary students. All the actions connected with developing soft and social skills are desirable. Teachers and students are eager to use new methods and learn new things”.

New education models and policies must take into account the mental health of teachers, non-academics and support staff as well as students, and develop strategies to help them.

According to **Slovakia**, it is not possible to fully estimate the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on students' educational outcomes, but it can be stated that such an impact is expected on vulnerable groups in particular.

## 9. Conclusions

### 9.1 National Conclusions

- In **Bulgaria** students did not have the chance to develop their own toolkit of personal, communication and social skills and competencies optimally. This fact, in combination with the specifics of the pre-pandemic era, the many psychological defence mechanisms that characterise puberty, could explain the impaired socialisation of adolescents, lack of soft skills, lack of motivation, low levels of concentration. All of the above should be compensated with appropriate programs and tools for personal, social, emotional development for students and teachers.
- According to **Spain**, the reopening of schools was achieved with sacrifices in terms of pedagogical choices, learning opportunities, especially in Secondary Education and in schools that opted for hybrid schooling, and less attention to vulnerable and disadvantaged students. Teachers are delighted to work with a reduced students ratio, confirming historical claims that reducing the number can have a positive impact on learning. Possible gaps can be pointed out. The COVID protocol mandates the use of teacher-centred methods rather than student-centred methods, so collaborative and active learning options, such as project-based learning methods are lost.
- The situation was stressful and produced a lot of problems after the pandemic in **Poland**. Students and teachers need a lot of support, especially psycho-pedagogical but also educational and methodological. There were several programmes during the pandemic to help students and teachers survive this difficult situation, but those programmes seem to be too little. It is very important to work on student-teacher relations as they

are the basis for the effective acquisition of skills and knowledge. The priority should be put on mental health and soft skills as a prevention action. The second important thing is to eliminate the learning gaps formed during the months of online education.

- In **Slovakia** the children manifested a significantly higher incidence of anxiety, depressive states, which often required the intervention of a specialist / pedo-psychiatrist. As these factors could significantly affect the overall health in subsequent years, it is important to properly manage the mental health of people, regardless of age. Students should receive support in managing the new situation in education, and this should focus primarily on stress reduction and negative emotions control, such as by providing access to relaxation programs and educational materials on mental health prevention. Teachers should also be provided with support in motivating students to learn, identify their needs and individualised teaching.

## 9.2. Conclusions of the Common Report.

The pandemic lockdown had an important impact in the lives of students, families and teachers for each of the countries that are part of the project consortium. We can observe the lack of real social connection, the school's socio-educational function as a safe location for gaining social, personal, and emotional experience was not realised during distance learning in an electronic environment, which is why various national and European aids needs towards this sector in order to strengthen the situation of students and teachers. However, despite its importance, there are several problems that have been observed in general in each of the countries:

1. Lack of socio-emotional skills in students.
2. Lack of online methodology and human skills.
3. Lack of training in soft skills and mental health.

### 1. Lack of socio-emotional skills in students.

This inevitably resulted in adolescent students becoming more socially and emotionally distant, as well as the adoption of much more passive patterns of behaviour, interaction, and functioning. In periods of significant physical and

psychological change during which young people encounter new settings and learn to relate to others. It should be noted that various factors and problems, such as interpersonal difficulties and anxiety, arise in these social relationships, which should be investigated in order to facilitate their adaptation and integration into various social groups, as well as to lay the groundwork for their personal development.

All of the above, affected by increasingly low levels of emotional, personal, and social engagement, can and should be compensated with personal, social, and emotional programs and resources.

## **2. Lack of online methodology and human skills.**

The ongoing COVID-19 crisis has seen a substantial increase in online learning by schools. Much of the training that was originally planned for the classroom is now being delivered online. For this reason, a series of resources and methodologies need to be developed to help consolidate learning and measure the effectiveness of online education. In this sense, training teachers to deliver online courses effectively is important to increase the quality of education. The new requirements of society call for a considerable increase in methodology and human resources.

## **3. Lack of training in soft skills and mental health**

In all countries the educational systems are seeking new methods to compete with the need to know how to relate to each other, to harmonise interpersonal relationships and to generate healthy bonds. The different factors arise after the covid-19 pandemic, the lack of online resources, which have effects on students well-being and force teachers to find new methods and solutions. All these things bring the necessity of new skills, resources and programs. There are **no specific training programmes in Emotional Intelligence or soft skills.**

Therefore, the new European generations play a decisive role. Firstly, because they are indispensable to ensure the future of each country and be an effective generational change. Secondly, because they are the most aware of new trends and changes in the labour market. Emotional Intelligence is indispensable and the educational community is the most aware and interested in this. At the same time, they are increasingly aware that they need training to develop new skills and competences.

It is necessary to increase the range of programmes and resources about Emotional Intelligence and to include soft skills in order to adjust to the needs and interests of the new generations and to make the educational sector adapt to a continuously changing labour market.

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