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## ***The Challenges of Educational Process in the “New Normal”: Primary School Teachers’ Perspective***

### **Extended summary**

Taking into account the situation caused by the corona virus pandemic, a qualitative research was set up to look at the challenges in the educational process from the point of view of primary school teachers. The areas in which the challenges were assessed are: conditions for organizing the educational process; changes in student behavior; and the implementation of activities in the context of the prevention of risky behavior of students in the period from the beginning of the corona virus pandemic (the second semester of the 2019/20 school year) until the end of the 2020/21 school year. The sample consisted of 12 representatives of six primary schools from different regions of Serbia (Belgrade, Niš, Novi Sad, Kragujevac, Leskovac, and Novi Pazar), which participated in the project “To success, together!” - Prevention of Risky Behaviour among School Children through Sports and Education, implemented in cooperation with the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development of the RS, the Ministry of Health of the RS and the Ministry of Youth and Sports of the RS, with the financial support of the Embassy of Israel and the OSCE Mission in Serbia. The data were collected during June 2021 through semi-structured interviews. Based on the knowledge related to the specifics

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of organising the educational process during the corona virus pandemic, a list of questions for a semi-structured interview was created. A total of six semi-structured interviews were conducted with two representatives of each school. The representatives of each school provided information on the subject of the research based on personal direct experience and on the basis of conversations with other members of the school staff where they work. The results indicate the initial challenges of teachers related to the use of digital technologies and online tools and ensuring “equal education” for all students. However, with the passage of time and a strong will of all actors in the educational process, the initial challenges have been overcome and currently teachers perceive digital devices and online tools as a powerful resource. Furthermore, due to the changed modality of functioning of the educational process, teachers consistently recognise certain changes in the behaviour of students. The most noticeable changes are related to the maintenance of healthy lifestyles of students (lack of physical activity of students, increase in body weight, excessive use of digital devices for playing video games and using the Internet, changes in sleep rhythm, weaker concentration, low commitment to school, loss of work habits of students and the inability to adopt them, greater isolation and withdrawal of students, as well as non-involvement in social interactions with peers). Respecting the views of other authors, it is necessary to support teachers to effectively deal with the new problems of students and organise additional activities that would positively affect the developmental outcomes of students. When it comes to the implementation of educational and preventive activities, there was very little space for the implementation of this type of activity during the corona virus pandemic, so only one primary school managed to implement these activities during the observed period. Due to the specificity of organising the educational process in the conditions of the pandemic, the central and main focus of schools was the implementation of the basic curriculum. As the school has a very important role in the prevention of various forms of risky student behaviour, through the implementation of various curricular and extracurricular activities (e.g. realisation of thematic lectures, workshops or discussions, advisory work with students, prevention of violence, social skills training, etc.), it is clear that this is a segment that should be given special attention in the current conditions of the functioning of the educational system. Regarding the identified priorities for preventive action in the context of students’ risky behaviour, school representatives first emphasise the need for support in direct work with students through various cooperative activities which will strengthen students’ social skills, group cohesion, and fill free time with prosocial content, but also the need for additional technical support. In addition to improving knowledge, schools are also open to support in the form of practical tools and curriculum that would serve as a starting point for further design of activities. In this sense, it is necessary to respect the needs of schools, and through diverse trainings to empower the employees to implement various preventive activities adapted to the needs of students in the changed operating conditions. Taking into account all the methodological limitations of the research, it can serve as a general indicator of the current needs of teachers for support in pandemic education, but also as a starting point for further research.

**Keywords:** challenges for teachers, pandemic education, changes in students’ behaviour, educational-preventive work

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