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THE LOCKDOWN GENERATION: FACING MULTIPLE CRISES IN EDUCATION AND THE LABOUR MARKET

La generación del encierro: Enfrentándose a múltiples crisis en la educación y el mercado laboral.



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Abstract:

The aim of this article is to analyse the impact of both the latest education system reforms in Poland and the COVID-19 pandemic on the educational and the labour market situation of vulnerable youth. To fully grasp the complexity of the current circumstances we start with a review of research on the so-called “lockdown generation”, i.e., young people who, as a result of the pandemic, have had their participation in education and vocational training hindered for a long time due to political decisions on school closures and online education. These analyses are complemented by individual interviews with relevant stakeholders. The results of the analyses show the disturbing effects of the current political changes and global crises on the educational situation and labour market entry of groups that are habitually considered the most at risk of educational exclusion. We discuss the greatest barriers and new inequalities created by the current accumulation of adverse external contextual factors and pre-existing risk factors at the individual and meso levels, as well as possible systemic measures of support for young people.

Keywords: adolescents; educational reforms; secondary schools; young adults; vulnerable youth.



Resumen:

El objetivo de este artículo es analizar el impacto tanto de las últimas reformas del sistema educativo en Polonia como de la pandemia de COVID-19 en la situación educativa y en el mercado laboral de los jóvenes vulnerables. Para comprender la complejidad de las circunstancias actuales, comenzamos con una revisión de la investigación sobre la llamada "generación del encierro", es decir, los jóvenes que, como resultado de la pandemia, han enfrentado obstáculos en su participación en la educación y la formación profesional durante mucho tiempo por las decisiones políticas sobre el cierre de escuelas y la educación a distancia. Estos análisis se complementan con entrevistas individuales con las partes pertinentes. Los resultados de los análisis muestran los efectos preocupantes de los cambios políticos actuales y de las crisis globales sobre la educación y la entrada en el mercado laboral de los grupos que habitualmente se consideran con mayor riesgo de exclusión educativa. Discutimos las mayores barreras y nuevas desigualdades creadas por la actual acumulación de factores contextuales externos adversos y factores de riesgo preexistentes a nivel individual y meso, así como posibles medidas sistémicas de apoyo a los jóvenes.

Palabras clave: *adolescentes; escuelas secundarias; jóvenes adultos; jóvenes vulnerables; reformas educativas*

1. Introduction

Crisis can be seen as a natural part of human history and social life (Koselleck & Richter, 2006). In the current context, however, we are facing a previously unprecedented accumulation of parallel crises overlapping each other on such a scale (Cairó-i-Céspedes & Castells-Quintana, 2016). According to different theories it might be associated with the processes of globalization and glocalization (Bauman, 1998; Giddens, 2007), the crisis of Western modernization (Šubrt, 2014), and technological revolution (Castells, 2009), which are superimposed by various crises in multiple dimensions such as socio-economic crises, global climate change crisis (Cairó-i-Céspedes & Castells-Quintana, 2016), cultural crises linked with the processes of colonization, decolonization or migration processes (Bhambra, 2017). Now adding to this complex social puzzle is a global pandemic crisis. In this article, we refer to this situation as *multiple crises*.

Pandemics and disasters stand at the forefront among the emerging obstacles to sustainable development because of their destabilizing effect and capacity to destroy well-being. These crises-inducing events disproportionately affect people in line with existing patterns of inequality, such as low-income households having less capital for disaster protection and recovery, thereby clearly highlighting the existing gaps (ECLAC, 2021; Moralli & Allegrini, 2021), including educational ones. Therefore, in our text, we try to grasp how the current situation, which consists of the ongoing education reform processes and simultaneous consequences of the pandemic (school lockdowns), affects vulnerable youth in the Polish educational context.

We define vulnerabilities of youth after Hardgrove and colleagues (2014), not as “the consequence solely of an emergency or single crisis. More often, they occur through a build-up of forces operating at the levels of individuals, households, institutions, communities and societies” (p. 10). There are many important reasons to focus on the vulnerabilities of young people who are challenged with multiple

crises. First, youth on the threshold of adulthood face specific difficulties related to their life stage. The transition to adulthood is connected with making decisions about continuing education, becoming independent, finding stable employment or starting a family. Possible deficits and deprivations in achieving development goals can bring devastating consequences for individuals as well as family and community. Second, young people who do not live up to their full potential undermine their abilities in adulthood (Hardgrove et al., 2014). Third, youth around the world are experiencing the consequences of significant changes concerning, among other things, economics, climate, depletion of natural resources or rapid advances in communication and information technologies, and recently - the public health crisis. Last, in recent years young people have been severely affected by the restrictions connected with the coronavirus pandemic, including lockdowns, remote education, challenging labour market conditions (Lee et al., 2020; Major et al., 2020), youth unemployment (Lambovska et al., 2021) and the effect of the pandemic on educational achievement (see: Anderson, 2021). For these reasons, much attention should be paid to youth, those at risk in particular.

Among the most significant factors explaining the social vulnerability of young people are those connected with family background (De Witte et al., 2013), but many studies have shown that it is schools (or, more broadly, the education system) that reproduce or exacerbate students' inequalities (for the discussion see: Downey & Condrón, 2016). Therefore, it seems necessary to carefully analyze the functioning of the whole education system in the context of supporting vulnerable youth - their social background as well as individual challenges, defined altogether as special educational needs (SEN).

The Polish educational system has undergone significant changes lately. The consequences of worldwide multiple crises were compounded in Poland by the profound education reform. This situation is assumed to deepen existing social inequalities and create favourable conditions for the emergence of new ones. All these factors put individuals at higher risk and impact the educational and labour market transition of vulnerable youth. Therefore, the following paper addresses the issue of the consequences of multiple crises for young people at risk.

2. The latest reform of the Polish school system

The shape of the current structure of the school system in Poland is a result of the recent education reform introduced by the conservative government in 2016 which took effect from the 2017-18 school year (Journal of Laws (JoL), 2017 item 59). It covered primary and secondary education, leading to a change from the system abbreviated as 6+3+3, which referred to six years of primary school, three years of lower secondary school and three years of upper secondary school, to the 8+4 system: primary schooling was lengthened, lower secondary schools were abolished, and the duration of upper secondary schooling was extended by one year. This system is a return to the way education was organised during the communist era and for ten years after the fall of communism.

Since the introduction of the lower secondary school into the Polish system in 1999, upper secondary schools (USS) have been structured into several tracks, whose organisation also underwent some changes between 1999 and 2016. However, for most of that time, the following schools were operating: a two- or three-year-long basic vocational school, a four-year-long technical school and a three-year-long general upper secondary school. The latter two types of school ended with a school-leaving exam (*Matura*) which was also a university entrance exam. In contrast, the basic vocational school only offered vocational qualifications. Continuing education at a higher level after this school additionally required completion of supplementary general or technical schools.

The choice of the upper secondary school became the first selection threshold in which parents' socio-economic status largely prevailed (Federowicz & Sitek, 2011). Research clearly showed that vocational schools were attended by students from low SES families and that status determinism was not overcome there, but rather further strengthened as evidenced by the high number of graduates with a low level of qualifications and higher risk of unemployment forming a social segment that was slipping away from education and labour market inclusion (Szafraniec & Boni, 2011, p. 85; Mikiewicz, 2011).

On the other hand, the decline in the importance of vocational education was accompanied by an increase in the importance of USS providing continuing education opportunities, contributing to opening the path to higher education and good social positions for an increasing number of young people. Polish 15-year-olds also began to achieve increasingly visible progress in successive editions of the PISA study, which was to prove the validity of the introduction of lower secondary schooling (Białecki, Jakubowski, & Wiśniewski, 2017).

However, although evidence-based, these successes did not reach a public opinion, which was dominated by the opposing narrative - focusing on the shortcomings of the Polish education system (Białecki, Jakubowski, & Wiśniewski, 2017). The right-wing government took advantage of this negative public sentiment to implement another game-changing reform of the education system's structure in 2016.

The ongoing reform entails a number of transformations that happened extremely fast, resulting in the old and new structures of the school system functioning in parallel. This caused an "accumulation" of year groups in the school year 2019-20, when graduates of both primary and lower secondary school began (upper) secondary school. In addition, with the liquidation of lower secondary schools and the extension of primary school by two years, the reform delayed the selection threshold for admission to the next educational stage. This change (longer secondary education), however, accelerated tracking by one year, i.e. the division of students between three types of secondary schools: general (academic), technical and sectoral vocational (previously called basic vocational).

Yet the foundations of the vocational reform have some elements that may be beneficial for young people who were previously excluded educationally. The basic vocational schools, which for years had been the weakest link in the secondary education system responsible for “producing” the group of youth at high risk of social exclusion (Federowicz & Wojciuk, 2012; Mikiewicz, 2011; Szafraniec, 2011) have been transformed into sectoral vocational schools. The sectoral vocational schools, introduced in place of the basic vocational schools, became two-stage schools. Graduates of stage I sectoral vocational schools may continue education for two more years in stage II sectoral vocational schools and obtain certificates confirming their vocational qualifications at the level of technical school as well as a secondary school leaving certificates, which enable the graduates to enter higher education with no additional threshold.

The reform eliminated some shortcomings of vocational schools through implementing dual education, the obligation of close cooperation of the school with local entrepreneurs, attractive education profiles, an increase of hours allocated for vocational training, and mandatory training for teachers (Nowak, 2019).

Nevertheless, after the introduction of the reform (Nowak, 2019), sectoral vocational schools are still selected by the smallest proportion (approx. 17%) of all primary school graduates in 2020-2021 (GUS, 2021). It needs to be pointed out that choosing vocational training is a negative choice, often preceded by school failure (Kozielska, 2019).

On top of that, the information on the results of the audit carried out by the Supreme Audit Office¹ (in Polish: Naczelna Izba Kontroli or NIK) points out that the 2016 reform is another of the many education reforms undertaken in the last 20 years and underlines that permanent changes could create uncertainty and additional stress for students, their parents and teachers (NIK, 2019) leading to a feeling of permanent insecurity.

3. Vulnerable youth in the Polish education system

The concept of vulnerability regards young people who are more exposed to risks than their peers (Arora, Shah, Chaturvedi, & Gupta, 2015). An at-risk youth is a young person who faces a range of conditions or circumstances that may place him/her at greater vulnerability for problem behaviours and impair their progress in education or society (Tidwell & Garrett, 1994). One of the important factors creating vulnerability seems to be social inequality, which undoubtedly affects children’s achievements, causing inequalities in educational opportunities. Poland, as well as many other countries, is still diversified with regard to income. It is confirmed by the World Inequality Report which states that “since 1990 there has been a spectacular increase of inequality in Poland” (Chancel et al., 2022, p. 39). According to the EAPN

¹ The Supreme Audit Office, or NIK, is the top independent state audit body whose mission is to safeguard public spending. NIK controls the way the Polish state operates and how it spends public funds; See: <https://www.nik.gov.pl/en/about-us/>

Polska Poverty Watch report, children, seniors and people with disabilities are those most affected by poverty. The year 2020 brought a deterioration in the labour market and wages, which negatively affected the budgets of many Polish families. In all families with children, extreme poverty increased slightly in 2020, probably due to the pandemic situation. Although the situation has improved significantly for large families and single parents, comparing 2014 and 2020, extreme poverty is still experienced by large families at more than twice the rate of other families (Szarfenberg, 2020). As poverty is considered the most common at-risk indicator, changes in the education system and social crises, such as the experience of a pandemic, may create new risk factors. When investigating issues related to youth at risk and their vulnerability, both individual and environmental factors should be taken into account.

The Polish education system recognises the following groups as those particularly in need of support: children with disabilities, those with specific learning difficulties or competence deficits, impaired communication skills, behavioural or emotional disorders, socially maladjusted or at risk of social maladjustment. The last term refers to the disruption of the emotional, social, and behavioural areas as well as personality disorders, which manifest themselves as a form of difficulties in adapting to recognised social norms, life and social tasks, in disturbed cognitive and emotional balance, not respecting moral principles, negative or inadequate reactions to the prohibitions and orders (Czapów, 1978; Grzegorzewska, 1968). Those children and young people are often at risk of exclusion, brought up in unfavourable conditions and negatively influenced by family or peers (Pytka, 2000). Another group mentioned as vulnerable by the Polish law are children suffering from chronic diseases, experiencing crises, trauma or social neglect connected with the living situation. A further group in need are children with adaptation difficulties related to cultural differences or changes in the educational environment, including those resulting from previous education abroad (JoL, 2020 item 1280). All groups mentioned are perceived as extremely vulnerable (OECD, 2019) and, what follows, at risk of, among others, dropping out of the education system or leaving it too early (Dale, 2010; Rumberger, 2011).

This diverse group of SEN learners are entitled to various forms of support within and outside the Polish educational system. Some forms of support (such as pedagogical counselling, vocational guidance or psycho-pedagogical counselling) are implemented in mainstream schools. The range of the implementation of assistance within the system is illustrated by statistical data showing that in the 2020-21 school year, only 447,296 out of 3,044,828 children in primary schools (excluding special schools) received specialist support (corrective-compensatory, speech therapy and/or developing emotional and social competencies) (GUS, 2021, p. 43, 65).

The groups described above, functioning in the school system without adequate support, are particularly vulnerable to systemic changes introduced hastily and the consequences of events disrupting the normal functioning of the education system, such as the pandemic. While experts' opinions on the concept of reform itself are varied, the rush to implement it without prior preparation of teachers and

the system, and the coincidence of timing with pandemic outbreaks, have the effect of contributing to exacerbating the difficulties of children and youth in many ways, for instance by increasing the number of young people at risk, changing their educational trajectories or affecting their transition to the labour market.

4. The COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences for education and young people

Young people who have experienced multiple shocks connected with the COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, school closures, lockdowns and emergency remote education, have been called “the lockdown generation” (ILO, 2020; Lee et al., 2020), “generation COVID” (Major et al., 2020), “the Covid generation” (Elliott, 2021; UNICEF, 2020) or the “Corona generation” (Bristow & Gilland, 2020; Kutwa, 2021). Adolescents and young adults have been affected by the COVID-19 crisis in three ways: disruptions to education, training and work-based learning; increased difficulties when entering the labour market; deteriorating quality of employment and losses of jobs and income (ILO, 2020; Lee et al., 2020; Major et al., 2020).

At the beginning of 2020, when the World Health Organisation announced a global pandemic (WHO, 2020), the world started experiencing the “first truly global emergency” (UNICEF, 2020, p.16). The pandemic has accentuated the weaknesses of all the education systems in the world (Kutwa, 2021). With the first wave of the pandemic in March 2020, remote work became a day-to-day reality for all those involved in education. Unprepared for the situation, schools in Poland suspended face-to-face classes and started distance education (JoL, 2020 item 410), which lasted till the end of May 2020 (JoL, 2020 item 780, 871). In the following school year, remote education in primary and secondary schools, continuing education institutions and vocational training centres started again in October 2020 and lasted till May 2021. Schools and institutions providing vocational or continuing education entirely switched to remote teaching. Theoretical classes were conducted remotely, while practical vocational training classes - only to a certain extent. Other practical classes were completed after the end of the restrictions. It is worth noting that a possibility was created for students of technical schools to pursue practical training in the form of an educational project or the form of a virtual enterprise (JoL, 2020 item 493 with amendments, 781). Apprenticeships could also be granted credit based on previous work experience or previously completed voluntary work or professional internship.

In the school years 2019-20 and 2020-21, the return to in-school classes happened gradually, depending on facility types. Similarly, returning to practical vocational training did not happen at the same time; the oldest students were the first to resume vocational training (Staszkievicz-Grabarczyk, 2021).

Prolonged school closures and remote education, lockdowns and uncertainty about the future as well as the need for social distancing have had a significant

impact on young people, especially their well-being and (lack of) social support (Szredzińska & Włodarczyk, 2021; The Lancet Child & Adolescent Health, 2020).

In addition to the psychosocial impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the adverse influence of school closures on learning should also be mentioned. As experts report (Azevedo et al., 2021; Dorn et al., 2020), learning loss could lead to lower assessment results, thus deepening inequalities in education. This is connected with the economic consequences: decreased future employment prospects and increased poverty. After schools were fully closed for the first time, it was estimated that missing in-school classes for a long time due to school closures can lead to lowered lifetime earnings by as much as £40,000 in the UK (Adams, 2020) or \$82,000 for US youth (Dorn et al., 2020). There have also been estimates that because of COVID-19's impact on education and due to lower returns to education, young people's future wages will on average be 6.2% lower (Kutwa, 2021).

5. Method

We conducted an empirical qualitative study during the fourth wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in Poland (November 2021). In our research, we were guided by the thesis that the accumulation of challenges associated with the current educational reform and the coronavirus pandemic represents a particularly difficult situation for students at risk of educational exclusion.

The study was exploratory and descriptive in nature. Firstly, non-reactive work also known as desk research (Babbie, 2005) was conducted. The subject of analysis were 20 purposefully selected reports, concerning the situation of children, adolescents and education in Poland during the pandemic, published by diverse social, academic and governmental institutions. The reports were selected until the sample was considered saturated. Secondly, nine individual semi-structured interviews with purposively selected education professionals and experts (pedagogical counsellor, psychologist, career advisor, school principal, local authorities representative) were conducted via Zoom. The selection of the respondents was based on the criterion of accessibility. A convenience sampling standard was used to select the participants, who were able to provide the researchers with comments and reflections resulting from their work within different contexts of the educational system and relate to the experiences of many young people with varying difficulties. The interviews were focused on the main research question, which was: What are/will be the (short- and long-term) consequences of recent educational system reforms in Poland and the current pandemic crisis for the functioning of vulnerable youth?

The questions concerned the effects of the multiple crises on youth at risk of educational exclusion, the biggest challenges that the schools are facing concerning the current social and economic situation or recent reforms of the educational system in Poland and their impact.

The data analysis started with identifying key ideas from the interview transcripts during initial coding. In-vivo coding was used to create further categories and prepare higher-level categorisation.

6. Results

The results of the analysis will be presented in line with the three levels of consequences of the multiplied crisis highlighted in the research questions: systemic, school and individual.

6.1. Systemic consequences of the multiple crises

The interviews have shown that the youth have faced many obstacles. First, they have experienced changes in education, introduced without prior warning and preparation. Second, they had to compete to enter secondary education, as the number of students applying to schools doubled and not everyone could be admitted to the school of their first choice. As one of the experts [E4] explained the situation: “They did not have a peacefully comfortable choice, because there was such a general pressure, a general fear - two years of graduates - what will it be like?” Third, they have experienced a teachers' strike² and, on top of that, they are dealing with remote education and living in a world terrorised by a pandemic.

As regards the reforms, some experts see the current changes in the organisation of education as a chance to postpone or avoid the consequences of choosing a further education path too early. At the same time, another expert reflects on the consequences of the lack of opportunity to change a negative peer environment. However, they share a common view on the occurrence of mistakes in the choice of educational and professional pathways made by young people. Such an opinion was expressed in the following words: “I think that in general... it is a mistake, when it comes to the reform. Because these kids have to know in advance, at the age of 14 (...) what they want to do for four years ahead. And that's not good.” [E1] Although the problem of wrong pathway choices has been noticed, the reason is not always connected with the latest reforms but with insufficient career guidance. As one of the experts [E3] stated, “Maybe some training, courses or even internships at an early stage would limit this wrong choice of profession.” Certainly, experts also see a lack of systemic solutions in overcoming the consequences of inappropriate, ill-advised youthful choices. Clearly, not only does the system impose the need to make life choices earlier than before, but also, in practice, it leaves no room for revision.

² Teachers' strike launched on 8 April 2019, aimed at pressing the government to introduce pay rises for teachers, implement changes in teachers evaluation and promotion, resignation of the minister and increase of resources for the education system. The strike was suspended on April 27, with intention of resuming it from September, which did not take place according to the teachers decision.

In the context of this multifaceted crisis there are many risks for young people who additionally experience the transition to the labour market. As one expert emphasised:

[Students] didn't experience apprenticeships, internships that they would normally have, first professional experiences. I mean, there are Covid restrictions, so you don't hire young workers. It is more difficult. These young people had an important developmental moment cut out, and, as a result, they're going to enter the labour market scared and confused. [E4]

According to another expert, such consequences will only slightly affect vocational school graduates who had the opportunity to participate in internships and practical training:

Well, as a vocational school, we were in a good situation, I think. Except for two weeks, when the lockdown was very hard, we worked... Maybe not half of the school, but almost half of the school worked all the time. The practical training was held at our place. [E3]

We must remember that the end of this education stage is followed by entry into the labour market. This transition and its consequences are crucial for the future of young people. Entrance to the labour market was analysed by experts in the context of its contemporary specificity and the skills required today.

At the moment, all reports on the labour markets of the future agree that the competencies of the future are, among others - apart from technological, and digital ones, certain cognitive competencies - soft skills, social, interpersonal and communication competencies. We didn't have time to develop these. [E4]

The same issue was also raised by another expert in the context of the reform alone:

In general, I feel that the reform is not adapted to reality. To me, what should change in the system is that we should not only care about results and learning, transferring knowledge, but also about equipping young people with various soft skills, and some life skills. And this should be at school but there is no place for it because the curriculum needs to be followed... [E1]

The multiple crises have exposed many imperfections in the Polish education system, with many implications for its direct beneficiaries and the school understood as an institution directly involved in the implementation of the reform and remote education.

6.2 School in confrontation with the multiple crises

The pandemic uncovered the problem of teachers' low digital competencies as a consequence of a lack of training and support in this area (Buchner & Wierzbicka, 2021). Although the scale of this phenomenon seems to be marginal, it is worth noting that the problem of disappearing teachers has been revealed. These were teachers who did not contact their students in any way remotely (Buchner &

Wierzbicka, 2021). As a result, a certain group of students were excluded and did not have any access to schooling. Another bad practice that occurred during remote education was the unequal treatment of classes. In "easy to teach" groups, teachers were more likely to teach synchronously, while in "difficult" ones, they sent assignments via electronic logbook, email, or through the platform used by the school (Buchner & Wierzbicka, 2021), which is an example of discriminatory actions that increase inequality. A different, less drastic consequence of the shift to remote education is a reduction in the quality of education. This manifested in a variety of ways. One of them was the disappearance of "less important" subjects such as music or visual arts subjects. In some schools, it was the teacher's decision, but in others, it was a top-down decision officially motivated by the digital hygiene of learners (Buchner & Wierzbicka, 2021).

Another barrier to a smooth implementation of remote education was the abnormally low digital competence of students (Buchner & Wierzbicka, 2021) which influenced the decrease in their attendance in remote classes (Zapora, 2021). On the other hand, although most of them have gained advanced computer skills and to some extent developed the ability to adapt to the changing reality, they have not learnt to study.

Teenagers pointed out technical issues as well (lack of good equipment for learning and poor Internet connection) (Buchner et al., 2020; Ptaszek et al., 2020; Woźniak-Prus et al., 2021). One expert said:

When there are four people at home: parents who work remotely and two children who learn remotely, let's say the parents have their company computers and the kids have to share one computer. Well, there already is a problem. It doesn't have to be extreme poverty. [E2]

As it turns out, the economic or housing situation of the family had a direct impact on the way and comfort in which remote education could be provided - expanding and deepening inequalities. The newfound financial hardship, revealed by the pandemic, seems to have torn down classic social divisions and shifted the boundaries of experienced poverty.

The inequality issue also emerged in the reports in the context of synchronous remote learning with cameras on. Some learners were unsure about their appearance and did not want to show their apartments due to their poor living conditions. (Buchner & Wierzbicka, 2021; Ptaszek et al., 2020). According to the teachers, online lessons without cameras were less engaging for students (Buchner & Wierzbicka, 2021). One may state that the consequences of social inequality have therefore a real educational impact.

This camera-off phenomenon also had a significant effect on remote truancy, which was a big problem in secondary schools and older primary school classes. The remote truants often formally logged in to lessons and then immediately muted the microphone, turned the camera off, and disappeared from the class or showed up for online classes selectively, participated in them ostensibly, or repeatedly failed to

return assignments on time. Remote truancy was even more common than disappearing students, whom teachers considered those who did not show up for online lessons, did not read assignment messages (or did not open attachments) and hardly ever submitted homework.

The disappearance of students from the remote education system was a relatively frequent phenomenon and affected children at all levels of education. As many as 48% of teachers in primary, secondary and technical schools indicated that at least one of their students had disappeared. In sectoral schools, the problem of disappearing pupils was experienced by 58% of teachers (Buchner & Wierzbicka, 2021). A contrary opinion may be formed from unpublished data from school records gathered by the local authorities in Warsaw - secondary schools reported losing contact with over four hundred students (less than 1% of learners). According to an expert, “It was a significant problem because kids were just disappearing, they were absent and unfortunately sometimes the school didn’t react quickly enough or did not react at all.” [E2]

As noted, it is essential that young people be provided with psychological support and prevention programs (Zapora, 2021). However, some were deprived of the opportunity to receive therapy or the meetings with the school therapist did not take place as often as in the regular school routine. What is more, many schools do not have full-time psychologists. The students are often simply supported by pedagogical counsellors and teachers (Buchner & Wierzbicka, 2021). As one of the experts said:

Some students come here [to the pedagogical counsellor] and don't go to classes. We have more requests for individual teaching or more requests for some kind of another pathway, or in general more reports of different difficulties on the part of the young people. My feeling is that there are more of them, but I think that's only the tip [of the iceberg], that we don't know about everybody anyway, because not everybody is talking. You are not able to reach everyone, even if you try. [E1]

On the other hand, according to another expert, for some troubled young people, who are already in therapy, it was a chance to return to school. As explained:

For some of them, it was a chance, because at some point even the obligation to turn on the camera during lessons was abandoned, so these young people could take slow steps. (...) They joined these lessons. So here we can think of inclusion. [E5]

As reported by one interviewee, minorities are another group of socially vulnerable youth that could benefit in a way from remote education. Although it is not directly evident from the statement which minorities the respondent had in mind, it is clear that this is a group that may have difficulties on school grounds that are relevant to the construction of self-image. As noted: “I have this sense that for these young people, the pandemic time was actually something that made it a little easier to think of themselves without being exposed to unpleasant peer relationships.” [E4]

6.3 Individual consequences of multiple crises

The main factors affecting the psychological state of young people during online learning were the lack of contact with peers (Buchner et al., 2020; Buchner & Wierzbicka 2021, Woźniak-Prus et al. 2021) and difficult family relations (Woźniak-Prus et al. 2021; Zapora 2021). When returning to school, there was an increase in symptoms of generalised anxiety and depressive disorders connected with difficulties in relationships with teachers, increased number of everyday duties and problems in relationships with friends and family members (Woźniak-Prus et al., 2021).

Reports confirm that students are under a tremendous amount of stress (Buchner, Majchrzak, & Wierzbicka, 2020; Ptaszek et al., 2020; Zapora, 2021). Young people were experiencing psychosomatic problems, such as stomach aches, headaches, sleep problems, nervousness, and lack of energy (Ptaszek et al., 2020). Anxiety, decreased life satisfaction, and other negative psychological effects are associated with a disturbed sense of security, not significantly associated with fear of coronavirus infection (Długosz et al., 2021; Woźniak-Prus et al., 2021).

Remote education with cameras on generated additional stress for youth related to the exposure of self and the conditions in which one lives and situations when students were vulnerable to being harassed by their peers (Zapora, 2021).

For many students with diagnosed mental health issues, long-term isolation exacerbated previous problems. This was particularly relevant for individuals being treated for depression, eating disorders, and learners on the autism spectrum (Buchner & Wierzbicka, 2021). As a consequence, some of them did not participate in remote education at all - experienced exclusion, and others participated to a very limited extent. Some teachers also indicated that pupils with non-diagnosed difficulties and those with diagnosed special educational needs (reduced intellectual abilities, shyness, stuttering) were also extremely struggling (Buchner, Majchrzak, & Wierzbicka, 2020). As one of the experts explained:

I think it's much more difficult for students with special educational needs, that is, various disorders, to find their way among their peers. This is evident in the fact that such students are helped by... daily routine, familiar situations. Also for the pupils around them, it helps to get used to them. And those students just haven't had that. [E4]

Respondents described young people facing multiple crises as those with competence deficits, with little social experience, dependent on digital relationships, having difficulties entering peer relationships, being lost in stagnation, very sensitive, highly focused on their emotions and health, and perceiving others as a direct threat. One of the experts described the lockdown generation in such words:

They did not have such experiences that young people naturally have, that is daily school life, everyday life with peers, with teachers, and meetings with representatives of various professions at schools. Also such simple everyday educational and developmental stimuli. They were kind of half-asleep at that time. (...) And now they graduate from school, being absolutely terrified. [E4]

7. Discussion and conclusions

Our study confirms the existence of multiple crises in which there occurs a unique accumulation of adverse external contextual factors - those associated with structural changes and those linked to the pandemic. Crises overlap with pre-existing risk factors present in the lives of vulnerable groups, which imposes a particular challenge not only for the students in question but more broadly for the whole education system. Evaluation of the last education reform has shown that organizational changes in schools are not able to have a regulatory effect on social divisions (Zahorska, 2009) if the reform is limited only to them, and will inevitably lead to the reproduction of the social system through schooling (Bernstein, 1990; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Bowles & Gintis, 1976).

Opinions on how to interpret and evaluate current educational reforms are extremely divided. Our experts emphasised the unfavourable changes - mainly acceleration of the choice of educational pathway - but also hopes or positives related to vocational training and prolonged primary school education cycle. Similarly, as far as the pandemic is concerned - the negatives are predominant, although some advantages are also seen, both on an individual level and a systemic level. Some pupils have found remote education beneficial, e.g. pupils from minority groups or with anxiety disorders. From a systemic point of view, in some schools, the pandemic has discovered the potential of teachers, strengthened their creativity, and created an opportunity to develop new competencies or acquire new teaching skills. The IT infrastructure or hardware and software equipment in schools were also improved.

An important point to consider in the context of inequalities and groups at risk was that of digital exclusion, related to the lack of access to equipment, lack of digital skills or, in the case of students with certain disabilities, the inability to participate in distance education. Here, the activities and proposed assistance for such students were poorly organised and lacked clear systemic solutions. Only from a certain point onwards were SEN learners allowed to participate in online learning at school premises, often under the supervision of an additional teacher.

The second level of inequality revealed by the pandemic is inequality resulting from SEN and mental health issues. These two categories of students have been affected the most by the lockdown and the current insecure reality and will probably continue to be for a long time. These effects will not only be linked to education but also to entering the labour market, which has also changed significantly.

However, it was not only youngsters with SEN, those from minorities or learners with developmental challenges or mental health issues who experienced difficulties in relation to the multiple crises situation. Reports and interviews emphasised quite unanimously the deteriorated mental state in the entire student

population, due to the situation of closing schools and being cut off from social relations. It is accompanied by increased demand for emotional and psychological support, which proves that the category of young people at risk who need additional specialist support has significantly broadened.

In this context, a new dividing line has been drawn between educational institutions with available specialists on site and those with limited or no access for various reasons (lack of funding, location, local government policy, etc.).

Based on these results, it is worth formulating some recommendations about supporting at-risk students, in the context of the Polish education system and other countries.

The most important recommendation, albeit a very general one, can be equated with the need to re-prioritise schools, so that pedagogical, preventive and supportive care is given priority, rather than being an unimportant addition to learning (Grzelak et al., 2021; Mutch & Peung, 2021). At present, there is an overemphasis on teaching and neglect of educational aspects in school life. According to the "Maslow before Bloom" principle, the essential needs of students must first be met before academic learning can be fully embraced (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021; Mann et al., 2021).

Although it is important to create systemic solutions for making up for the lack of knowledge, qualifications or skills to enable young people a smooth insertion into the labour market (Kutwa, 2021), the schools need "to calibrate and recalibrate what is most essential for student progress during this time, reduce the total number of educational targets students are expected to achieve, and develop a more flexible range of when it is acceptable for students to achieve them" (Mann et al., 2021).

Above all, the system of psychological and pedagogical assistance and availability of social specialist services urgently needs strengthening, providing support both to students and teachers, as well as other groups involved in the education community. It is also vital to increase funding for education and the health systems, especially for prevention and mental health care, so that young people are able to cope with greater burdens and social expectations. Finally, labour market policies targeting the unemployed and young people seeking retraining must be provided (Kutwa, 2021).

With regard to vulnerable groups, an easily accessible network of institutions offering counselling and psychological support should be created. Also, regular monitoring of the emotional wellbeing, assessment and counselling of pupils in need must be provided on the systemic level, together with an offer of remedial, therapeutic activities and social skills training, as well as extracurricular activities and, if necessary, referral to specialised services (Grzelak et al., 2021).

The evidence presented in the article comes from numerous reports, as well as interviews with educational professionals (teachers and counsellors), and shows that lockdowns and social vulnerability have affected a broad range of youth.

However, to fully explore the issue of the lockdown generation, further research into students' experiences is needed.

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