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Leadership of the school head in times of social isolation

Admission

Educational leadership is critical in this age of mediated education. A new approach to school management is needed, focusing on the leadership role of the school head and exploring the potential of teachers and students. The effectiveness of the principal as the person in charge of the school, responsible for its teaching, educational and care activities, depends to a large extent on the effectiveness of its leadership.

Faced with distance education, the work of school heads is becoming more complex and intensified. It is subject to greater accountability for the results achieved by the school. One of the main functions of principals is to support organizational learning, support the development of the teaching staff's potential, react to the real problems of the school and develop solutions adapted to the unique conditions existing in a school.

Responsible leadership has now taken on an even deeper meaning as teachers and students alike find themselves in an unknown, rapidly changing, global environment. COVID-19 has changed the way we live and work with far-reaching consequences. Compassion and concern for employees and the school environment has become more important than ever.

Virtually all schools are still working on modifying the way they work in the short and long term. The speed of reacting to changes is crucial in the current situation, as all educational entities try to function and operate as before, but at the same time struggle with what is happening in their daily life.

In addition to caring for employees, leaders need to show they have a plan. They do not need to know everything, but they should be honest about the data they use to make decisions. School management that looks proactively to the future and responds to emerging needs by responding to problems can significantly help people in times of turmoil.

Leadership

A review of the literature on the subject proves that it is difficult to identify even one theory of "good" leadership which everyone would agree with. Now - with increasing force - it can be seen that no single theory or concept is appropriate. The existing theories and concepts of leadership suggest possible approaches to leading others. The various approaches of theorists to leadership only speak of a certain

path of behavior for leaders, therefore each of them can be considered a bit narrow. Numerous theories and concepts can be thought of as pieces in a complex puzzle called leadership.

An analysis of the literature on the subject of leadership, including educational leadership, shows how many challenges are facing both the theory and practice of leadership.

Defining the concept of leadership is not an easy task. There are many different definitions, each different but incomplete. Leadership is a concept that comes from the sciences of organization and management. It is defined in various ways because it is a term that does not have a recognized and accepted single definition. In the field of organizational science, leadership is defined as a form of influencing employees. In management sciences, leadership is regarded as an influence not supported by coercion and as a certain set of qualities attributed to the person of the leader. In the field of psychological science, leadership is not domination but the art of persuading others to achieve a common goal (Goleman, Boyatzis, Mckee, 2002, p. 22-23). On the other hand, in pedagogy, leadership is the ability to influence the behavior of others (Kwiatkowski, 2010, p. 19-20).

The approach to leadership has evolved over the years. One attempt to define this term focuses on the following theories:

The theory of traits (dominant in 1900-1945) focused on the traits a leader should be endowed with. It is one of the oldest and most famous trait approaches. The starting point for this theory was the assumption that a leader must be born. The leader must have charisma, which is the result of individual properties and social factors (Armstrong, 2005, p. 214-219), a specific leadership ability resulting from the personality traits of a given individual. In practice, this meant exploring the characteristics of the ideal leader and distinguishing him from non-leaders. Hence, attention was focused on:

- physical characteristics, such as: height, weight, appearance, age, gender;
- abilities and skills, such as: intelligence, knowledge, the way of communicating and persuading one's ideas, analyzing, making decisions and solving problems;
- personality traits, such as conservatism, intro-extroversion, assertiveness, self-confidence (Pocztowski, 2018, p. 187-188).

The behavioral approach, with a time frame spanning 1945-1965, focused on behaviors and actions in which an effective leader is a participant. The behavioral approach distinguishes a set of methods of conduct and methods of action that are specific to a given leader. The researchers who analyze behavior and management styles assumed that it is necessary to learn about effective methods of conduct, and then train them with people who manage the work of others (Pocztowski, 2018, p. 200-202). Aleksy Pocztowski distinguished two dimensions of leadership: people-oriented and task-oriented, which derive from the behavioral approach.

The interactive and situational theories dominated from 1969 to 1978, focusing on the conditions under which certain skills, leadership styles, and behaviors are effective. Ricky W. Griffin proposed the theory that any management approach is good – it only needs to be applied to the appropriate situation. It is obvious that an effective solution applied in one situation may not work at all in another. According

to the situational approach, the manager should determine which method in a given situation, under given conditions and at a given moment, will best contribute to achieving the intended goals (Griffin, 2013, p. 565-566).

Since the end of the 1970s, **theories of transformational leadership** have been applied, which focus on finding answers to the questions: what makes us lead others? What makes us effective in action? According to the quoted A. Pocztowski, a transformational leader motivates their subordinates to do more than initially intended, awakens a sense of the value and importance of their tasks; it makes them aware that they are going beyond self-interest for the benefit of the team, organization or society. The transformational leader points to the need to raise employees' own needs to a higher level. He is their mentor and exemplar. Such a leader can only be effective when he uses his own vision and energy to inspire his subordinates (Pocztowski, 2018, p. 200-202).

Joanna Madalińska-Michalak (2007) considers the concept of leadership as:
– feature;
– skill;
– social relationship;
– social process (Madalińska-Michalak, 2007, p. 9).

Leadership as a trait focuses on the leader, and especially on his constant traits, which are most often related to his character and predispositions. The theory is that there are people who are born stronger, smarter, and more able to lead others than others. Such people can stand out from the crowd and achieve remarkable success. As a result of this theory, there is an attempt to isolate specific properties describing effective leaders. Thus, by considering leadership as a trait, we mean the set of personal qualities attributed to those who are perceived to be successful in exercising leadership over others (Leżucha, 2019, p. 81).

Leadership as a skill means that a person has the ability to lead someone. In this case, leadership can be described as the ability to involve others in the process of achieving a goal, or the ability to win people over, make them want to do something. This approach emphasizes the importance of leadership skills in the leadership process and emphasizes the ability to develop leadership competencies so that the chosen person can fulfill their tasks.

Leadership as a relationship shows that we pay attention first and foremost to the influence of a relationship between those who lead and those who follow them. Leaders' influence over followers is subordinated to achieving their goals. Since the leader and his followers are part of the leadership process, when analyzing this phenomenon, consider issues that are important to both the leader's followers and himself. They should all be seen in relation to the relationships they create (Leżucha, 2019, p. 81).

Leadership as a social process involves the influence of one person on another or on groups and leads to the achievement of mutually agreed goals (Northouse, 2009, p. 12). In this situation, leadership means an orderly sequence of changes, over time, and most often consists of expressing a vision, building a strategy, influencing the performance of others, encouraging cooperation in a team and setting an example, stimulating action and motivating (Leżucha, unpublished doctoral dissertation 2020, p. 42-43).

Educational leadership

Educational leadership is a special type of leadership. According to Grzegorz Mazurkiewicz (2009), it is a process that concerns teaching and learning, as it is associated with triggering the ability of others to perform tasks to the best of their ability, and at the same time with a sense of meaningfulness, dignity, respect for others and satisfaction. These elements are complemented by Joanna Madalińska Michalak (2010), emphasizing that it is the more effective the more participation, delegation of powers, trust in others and democratic behavior it contains.

Educational leadership is concerned with teaching and learning processes. Its specific goals depend on the context in which the learning takes place, but the learning of individuals remains the primary goal. When talking about educational leadership, it should be remembered that education is a process by which a community of learners is born thanks to the involvement of the mind, emotions, previous experiences, sensitivity to the conditions of action and to other people, while referring to the values accepted by a given community.

Picture 1. Elements of educational leadership
Source: own study based on: G. Mazurkiewicz, *Przywództwo edukacyjne – nowy paradygmat zarządzania w oświacie* [w:] *Przywództwo edukacyjne w teorii i praktyce*, S.M. Kwiatkowski, J. Madalińska Michalak (red. nauk.), Wyd. FRSE, Warszawa 2010, s. 129; J. Madalińska-Michalak, *Istota i modele przywództwa szkolnego* [w:] *Przywództwo w szkole*, J. Madalińska Michalak (red.), Oficyna Wydawnicza Impuls, Kraków 2007, s. 9.

The same is true of leadership. It is not a feature of an individual or even a group, but an organizational quality - the result of the collaboration of many people. The leadership potential is therefore not associated with the charisma, authority or vision of individuals, but with the ability to increase the participation of organization members in the decision-making process.

The educational leader improves the ability to manifest the potential of others in order to move from an unfavorable situation, i.e. functioning in a group of one leader, to the desired one, i.e. participating in the decision-making process of many people and increasing the group's leadership potential. A conscious leader should

work together to create situations with the group that enable everyone to learn and solve problems.

Leadership in education should be understood as a process (interaction) between people and is characterized by the following characteristics - properties:

- educational leadership is a long process of teaching, learning and development, the specific goals of which depend on the context in which the learning takes place,
- with the learning and development of individuals, groups and societies as the primary focus;
- educational leadership improves the ability to manifest the potential of others - aware leaders should create situations that enable everyone to learn and solve problems together with the group;
- performance of tasks is determined by the adopted system of values that are more important than indicators imposed from outside;
- the potential of educational leadership is not related to the charisma, authority or vision of individuals, but to the organization's ability to increase the participation of its members in decision-making and learning;
- thanks to educational leadership, a community of learners is formed through the involvement of the mind and emotions, previous experiences, sensitivity to operating conditions and to other people, while referring to the values accepted by a given community (Mazurkiewicz, 2010, p. 28).

Leadership in education is the provision of conditions for conducting the education process appropriate to the context and jointly setting the direction of further actions to meet real needs. The first element of educational leadership is sensitivity to the functioning of the school and the needs of the environment, and the ability to respond to these conditions. Of course, this way of functioning means uncertainty, constant changes in the direction of work, requires a very broad understanding of the situation, but it also allows us to influence reality.

The second element is the appropriate attitude and behavior of leaders. They need to understand their job as appertaining to their colleagues by making them aware of the potential, responsibility and authority they have. An educational leader is a person who has the power to persuade and manifest the potential of others. Learning is also a cultural and emotional process. This is also leading people: it is the combination of all possible ways of being with others and influencing them not by manipulating or controlling their behavior, but by deep, personal contact.

Leadership is the ability to trigger ability in others to perform tasks in the best possible way, and at the same time with a sense of meaningfulness, dignity, satisfaction and respect for others. Caring for the development and improvement of each unit as well as organizational development of the institution, i.e. designing appropriate situations, setting tasks for colleagues and problems the solving of which enables it to become a learning organization - this is the next, third element of educational leadership. You should think about the leadership process in the same way as a good teacher thinks about teaching. The teacher designs situations conducive to learning, problems to be solved and helps others to solve them on their own (Leżucha, unpublished doctoral dissertation 2020, p. 58-61).

Leadership of the school head in times of social isolation - research results

In the era of the pandemic, when the society was isolated, Maciej Tanaś expressed that as the escape room. On the other hand, the leadership of the director took on a new meaning. It has moved from classrooms, teachers' rooms to the net. It is not an easy test for both the management and teachers, as many more responsibilities have fallen on them. While directors were forced to share their leadership, some were better off, others were worse. In the era of distance education, all attention is focused mainly on teachers, students and parents, while principals are somewhat ignored.

Educational mediated leadership is a new topic, which focuses on the physical and mental well-being of principals and the effectiveness of their leadership in times of social isolation. The study covered 40 principals of primary schools from the Podkarpackie Region.

The surveyed principals in the vast majority (over 84% are people with a master's degree, while less than 16% are respondents with a doctoral degree). Every fourth respondent held the position of a director for over 20 years, while less than 37% were school heads with less than 5. The respondents were dominated by male, while female constituted almost 11%.

The research used the diagnostic survey method, the technique was a questionnaire, and the tool was an Internet questionnaire, which was developed and sent to school principals. The obtained research results made it possible to take a closer look at the mental and physical condition of the respondents and learn about their opinions related to their own leadership in the era of social isolation.

The online survey form consisted of three parts:

- the first one concerned the data sheets and consent to participate in the study;

- the second one was devoted to the welfare of directors during the introduced restrictions related to the epidemic threat of Covid-19;

- the third one focused on work in a remote mode during the introduced restrictions, including online teaching and management of the school.

Mental and physical well-being of directors

The anxiety over the Covid-19 pandemic has put the mental health of executives to the test. Long-term increase in the level of stress, in conjunction with the continuation of remote work, may result in mood disorders. The period of the pandemic and various negative experiences in the private and professional spheres made us more prone to deterioration of well-being. Meanwhile, not only general satisfaction with life or work results, but also the body's resistance depends on the mental condition, which is extremely important in the present circumstances.
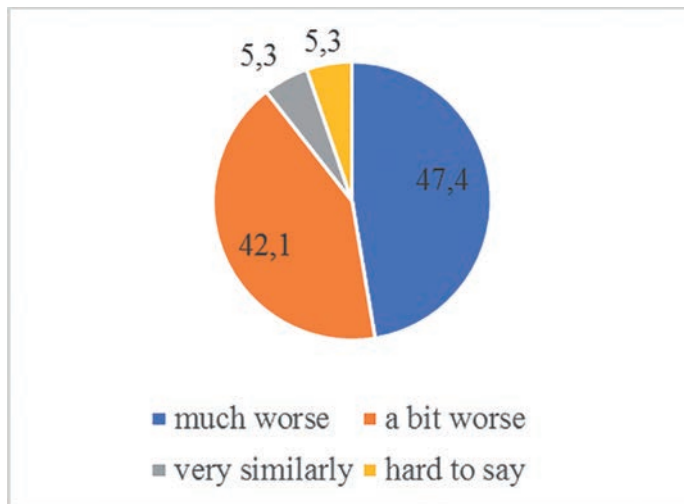
Chart 1. Mental well-being of directors during the pandemic
Source: own study

Over 89% of directors assessed that they felt worse and much worse. The principal's lack of direct contact with teachers and students makes it more difficult to spot potential problems that employees may struggle with. While the results and effectiveness in achieving the assumed goals are fully measurable also during distance education, noticing the first signs of a worse mental condition is definitely more difficult. Although stress has been with us almost forever, nowadays we do not deal with it well enough. In the face of the pandemic, new stressors have been added to the existing stressors: anxiety for health and life, worries about work and finances, difficulties resulting from changes in the functioning of the family.

Physical activity also improves cognitive abilities, such as memory and concentration of attention, thanks to which a person is able to work more effectively and make better decisions. Currently, when sports facilities are still closed, the lack of exercise, also in the open air, causes a significant deterioration of the physical well-being of the respondents. Over 73% of them assessed that they currently feel worse and much worse. Lack of physical activity and normal functioning in the profession makes it difficult to maintain good physical condition.
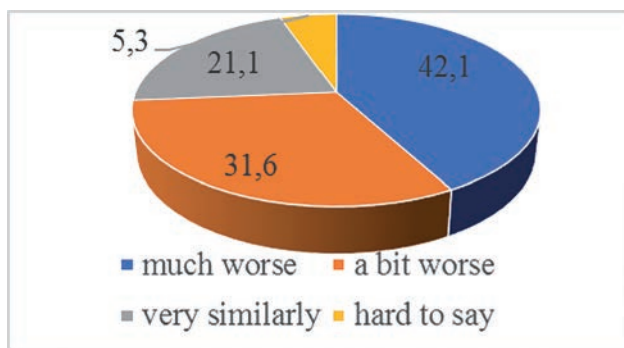
Chart 2. Physical well-being of directors during the pandemic
Source: own study

A few months ago, the whole world stopped, a virus appeared and messed up everyone's life quite profoundly. After a long time of "home closings" things started to return to normal until more infection records were broken and restrictions returned. Whether someone believes in the pandemic or not, it has had consequences in many areas of our lives.

About 80% of the surveyed principals declared that lockdown also had positive sides to family relations. The respondents mentioned, inter alia, closeness of ties, frequency of contacts in the closest family, self-confidence, appreciation of the time spent together. On the other hand, the time of increased restrictions and remote work was particularly difficult in relationships with extended family.
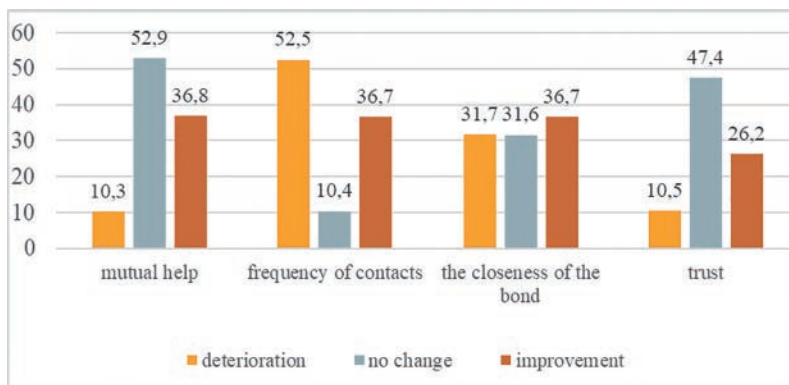

Chart 3. Relationships with the family during the pandemic
Source: own study

One of the areas affected by the pandemic is undoubtedly the sphere of interpersonal relations. Initially locked at home, people were deprived of the opportunity to meet friends and acquaintances. On the one hand, it caused sadness and reluctance to act, and on the other - contributed to the appreciation of existing relationships or values present in their lives.

Compared to family relationships, those with friends have deteriorated significantly. The respondents mentioned the weakening of the friendship bond, the weakening of the frequency of contact, help and trust. As can be seen, the frequency of contacts and closeness with friends has deteriorated significantly. Mutual assistance has increased somewhat as people in hard times are inclined to help others more.
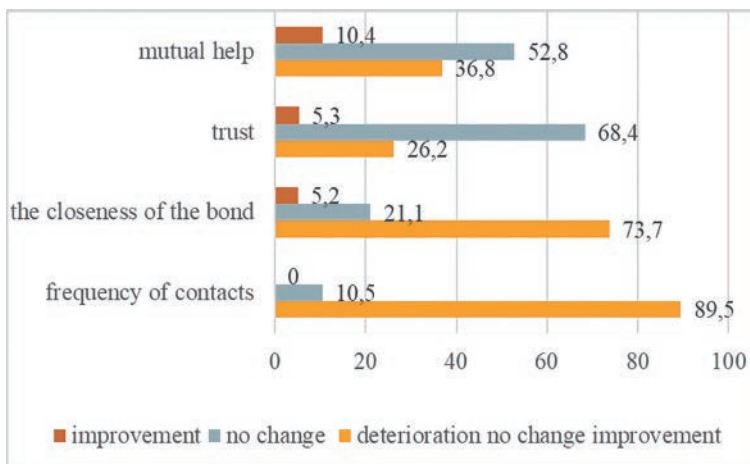

Chart 4. Relationships with friends during the pandemic
Source: own study

The period of the pandemic was and is a difficult time for principals who were constantly worried about their own safety, the safety of their families, students and teachers. Among their biggest problems, the respondents mentioned: excessive workload, the inability to obtain bonuses and rewards, limited professional development opportunities, weakened professional stabilization and the lack of sense in the work performed.

In their professional and teaching activities, the directors expected help and support during the introduced restrictions related to the COVID-19 epidemic threat. They mentioned support in the field of health care first, then strengthening the sense of security, psychological and financial support and good communication.
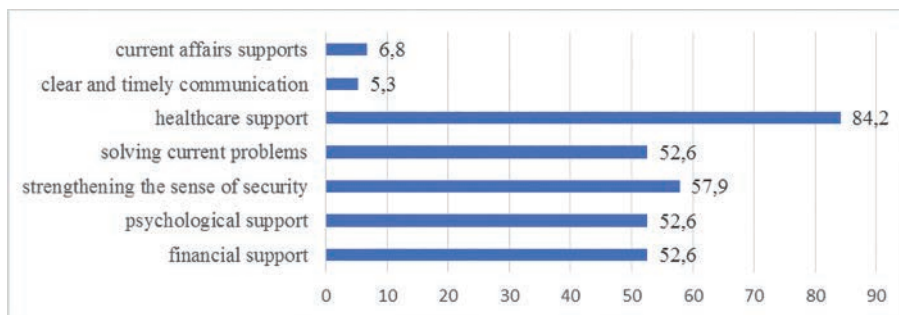
Chart 5. Types of support expected by principals during the pandemic
Source: own study

During social isolation, principals, as citizens, were most afraid of: loss of position, loss of health, quality of relations at school after the return of employees and students, deterioration of the epidemic situation in the country, depression, neglect in children, extension of distance learning for older classes, securing full-time employees, losing contact with young people, limited opportunities for student development, decline in teaching effectiveness, threats to students' safety.

As family members, principals fear the most: loss of health, illness of loved ones, mental exhaustion, increased morbidity, hard lockdown, death.

On the other hand, on the basis of friends, they are afraid of: lack of cooperation, loss of friendships and trust, breaking contacts, ending relationships through long-term distance, alienation, withdrawal, lack of understanding and support in a difficult situation, sickness of colleagues, deterioration of relationships, mental problems, depression of my colleagues/fiends.

Management in remote mode during the introduced restrictions with the epidemic threat of Covid-19

Polish education faced a great challenge, which was the need to reorganize the work of schools and institutions in connection with the outbreak of the coronavirus epidemic in the world. The obvious lack of experience and the speed of decision-making influenced the quality of actions taken as part of the implemented remote education. Schools and institutions coped with the new challenge to varying degrees. Some used systemic, comprehensive solutions by implementing distance learning platforms, while others we observed were characterized by chaos and the lack of coherent concepts for a new type of teaching.

Certainly, however, both principals and teachers made an extraordinary effort to develop their own competences necessary in planning and implementing activities as part of distance learning.

One of the most important tasks at the time of limiting the functioning of the education system units was the choice of the method of conducting remote classes with students. Schools used various solutions, some of them were recommended on the website of the Ministry of Science and Education. By indicating the directions of action to the directors, the focus was on possible channels of communication with the subordinate staff.
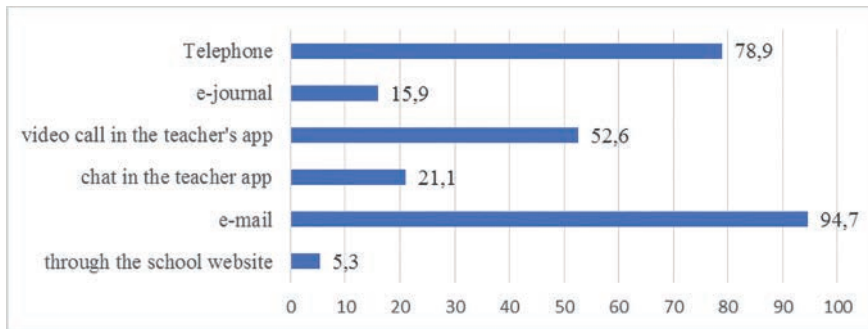
Chart 6. Means of communication with subordinates during social isolation
Source: own study

In communication with teachers, principals most often used: email, traditional telephone and chat in the teacher's application.

Another challenge faced by principals was the implementation of remote school management. In many cases, school leaders did not have experience in this field, and so far have not used solutions that apply modern technologies, e.g. working on disks in the "cloud". On this level, directors faced a number of difficulties.

The biggest problem for the directors in the assigned management of the institution was the malfunctioning Internet, the lack of IT preparation for the operation of educational platforms, difficult contact with the leading body and faulty equipment.
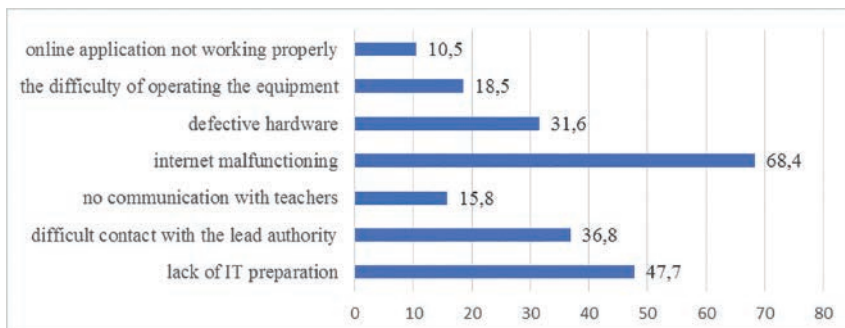
Chart 7. Difficulties encountered in remote school management
Source: own study

In managing and communicating with teachers, principals most often used their own equipment (personal laptops) (Chart 8).
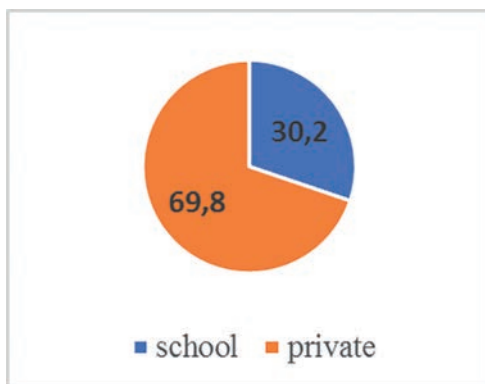

Chart 8. Type of equipment used in remote school management
Source: own study

On the other hand, when it comes to the type of Internet connection, it is mostly school networks, but as shown in Chart 7 - unfortunately of poor quality.
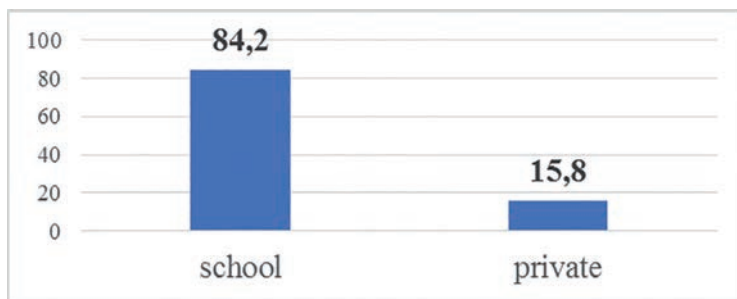

Chart 9. Type of Internet connection in remote school management
Source: own study

In remote management, directors face a number of difficulties and also expect support to be able to overcome these problems. Isolation causes a number of mental, emotional, technical and administrative problems.

The most common difficulties were: lack of technical assistance, lack of preparation for work on teachers 'and students' platforms, lack of psychological support, lack of job training on educational platforms, lack of substantive and family support in good planning of professional and family duties.

The pandemic changed the school reality. Overnight, the directors reorganized their workbench, adapted their working methods to the new reality, and quickly

learned the tools of remote work. All of this required effort, time and, above all, support. Over 68% of principals counted on the support of their relatives, mutual support of teachers, the attentiveness of the governing body and the school board of education.

Despite emerging difficulties and "management loneliness", 54% of principals assess the effectiveness of school management as good or very good (Chart 10).
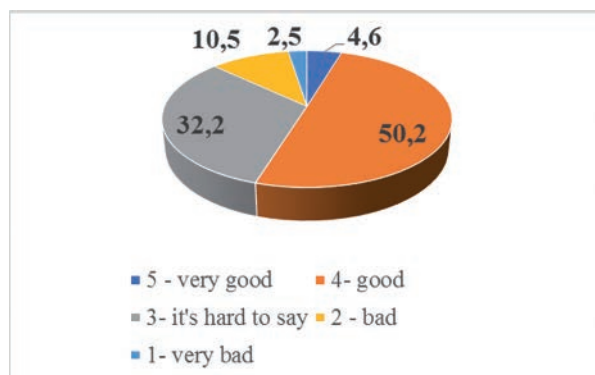

Chart 10. Assessment of the effectiveness of remote school management
Source: own study

Over 55% of principals believe that remote teaching has had an impact on the effectiveness of school management. And this is manifested in the enrichment of the form of management, new requirements in the organization of the work of the institution increased the competence of directors in diagnosing, introducing more effective solutions for rationalizing the functioning of the school in atypical conditions, interpersonal ties have been strengthened, which has resulted in an even better organization of work, directors have become more assertive in action, employees have been activated to undertake innovative solutions, new task teams have been established to support the head teacher and teachers, new formal solutions are introduced which will result in the improvement of obtaining external funds for the school. Unfortunately, remote management, according to 29% of principals, also resulted in the loss of the headmaster's authority, weakening of relations with employees and the need to delegate a significant part of school management to teachers in formal matters relating to students.

The respondents emphasized the advantages of remote education:
- possibility of contact with children who cannot participate in stationary classes due to illness, ability to use tic??? tools;
- replacing traditional education;
- modernity, the possibility of education from anywhere in the world;
- innovation;
- learning about new work tools;
- parental involvement in education and child work;

- increasing competences in the use of digital technologies in learning and teaching;
- attractiveness and access to multimedia.
  On the other hand, among the threats, directors notice:
- increasing "combinationalism" of students on the other side, limiting themselves to Internet knowledge, Internet addiction;
- alienation of students and teachers;
- system unpreparedness;
- lack of communication;
- no confidentiality;
- isolation, anti-social attitudes;
- too long time spent in front of the computer;
- depression;
- limiting the knowledge and skills of pupils, adolescents, students to efficiently find solved tasks in the network, etc.;
- alienation of people;
- isolating students, deficiencies in education and upbringing;
- relations with students, the inability to help students withdrawn from education for various reasons;
- boredom and getting used to it;
- mental malaise;
- teachers' lack of responsibility.

In the opinion of the vast majority of the directors, remote management is not satisfactory for the director (Chart 11).
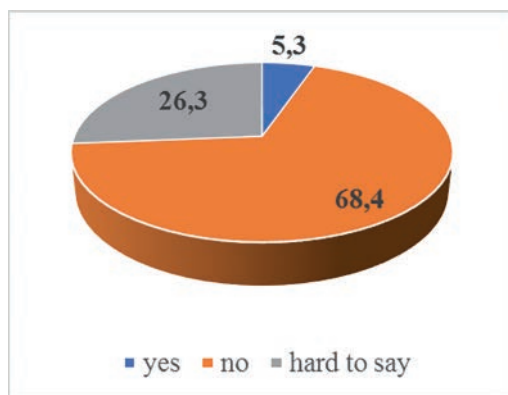

Chart 11. Assessment of principal's satisfaction with remote school management
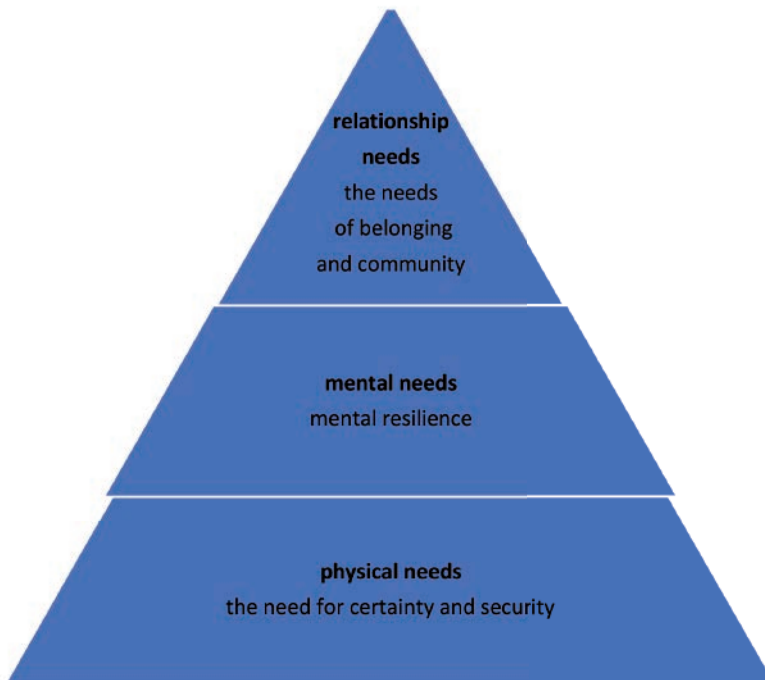Source: own study

According to the principals, the lack of satisfaction with the management of the school in the remote mode results from the difficult contact with both the teaching staff and students, the feeling of having no influence on what is happening with the children and teachers, the withdrawal of some teachers, the lack of ongoing,

continuous contact with subordinates. According to the respondents, increased absenteeism of employees determines disinformation and difficult communication, while the lack of contact with the student makes the school an office building in which procedures are created and reports are written.

The new face of educational leadership

At a time when most schools work remotely, the coronavirus pandemic is harvesting worldwide, and the labor market is receiving information about numerous layoffs, the role of the headmaster is even more important - it is a real test of his communication, motivating and empathy skills. How did school principals deal with it?

The results of the research conducted among principals indicate that schools and their principals managed quite well with the challenges brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. In the opinion of the managers, the employees were, in the vast majority of cases, provided with adequate resources for the performance of professional tasks and safe working conditions. According to the surveyed directors, their actions contribute to ensuring the basic, mental and relational needs of their subordinates (pic. 2).

Picture 2. Needs that the director should satisfy nowadays.
Source: own study based on: "A. Maslow's Pyramid of Needs" (Pocztowski, 2018, s. 229).

In their opinion, directors are effective because they react quickly to specific, unambiguous needs of their subordinates - they efficiently solve reported emotional, relational, technical, substantive and organizational problems.

The pandemic has shown that the traditional model of education, based on the transfer of knowledge and its reproduction, does not prepare for the functioning in a world full of challenges. The appearance of the SARS-CoV-2 virus has knocked a large part of society out of the rhythm of the school and university routine. The transmissive model of the Polish education system stimulates imitative and mechanical thinking. The relational model can stimulate and develop reflective and creative thinking based on imagination. Such thinking, in turn, allows for taking pre-emptive actions and actively shaping reality. Its dissemination equips communities and society with the ability to systemically adapt and transform, which becomes an important competence in the unpredictable and changeable environment (Ptaszek, Bigaj, Dębski, Pyżalski, Stunża, 2020, p. 9-11).

Instead of an ending

The COVID-19 pandemic has painfully demonstrated a lack of resilience in many important areas of collective life and preparedness for unforeseen events. This also applies to education. In order to strengthen the position of an educational leader in a remote school, short- and long-term actions should be taken to ensure resilience to emergencies. This applies to strengthening the resilience of the education system resulting from increasing uncertainty, reduced predictability and constant change.

The first step is the need for the school to adapt to changes that were missing in many places.

Educational institutions have appropriate resources of various types: access to modern technology, materials, instructional videos, and an appropriate number of experts who can be used, it is another important factor in empowering the position of an educational leader. The pandemic situation has revealed significant inequalities in the possession and access to such resources.

Flexibility, i.e. the ability to evolve institutions, change their functions, adapt to changing requirements and quickly find the application of alternative methods of operation (Jaskulska, Jankowiak, 2021).

Reevaluation of the existing certainties (e.g. with regard to the importance of the core curriculum, methods of checking knowledge or, in general, the hierarchy of values in didactics).

Ability to include and far-reaching integration of all entities participating in didactic processes. In this context, the ability to build a community of goals, use knowledge, and the competences of groups and individuals is important. It is necessary to create effective social networks for transmitting and receiving information, exchanging experiences, but also creating systems of mutual support.

Supporting teachers in developing digital competences, manifested in constant access to professional help - both in terms of improving their ability to use modern technology as well as psychological one. In this case, it is important to equip schools

with hardware and software. Development and dissemination of remote (digital) tools for measuring learning outcomes.

Changing the teachers' remuneration system and introducing clear criteria for awarding incentive benefits that promote innovative, committed teachers. Teachers should be remunerated according to the tasks they perform, which include lessons and other activities with the students (Czapliński P. (i in.), 2020, p.29-31).

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Leadership of the school head in times of social isolation

Abstract

Social isolation was a difficult period for students, parents, teachers, and especially for school managers, i.e. principals. They were faced with new challenges and difficulties, they had to reorganize their work and the functioning of the entire school. Remote management of an educational institution is not easy at all, especially since so far it has not been necessary. The

directors had to face their own weaknesses, sometimes resulting from the lack of technical skills, but also as people they faced fear, fear for their lives, their families and employees. They were a support for teachers, students and parents in this extremely difficult period. This article is an attempt to understand what difficulties education managers had to face, how they dealt with it and whether they see the sense of working and managing a school at a distance in the future.

Keywords: school director, the well-being of directors, educational leadership, remote education, school management

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