

APRES COVID

European Sectoral Social Partners in Education Addressing Psychosocial Risks for an Equitable and Sustainable Recovery from the COVID-19 crisis

Case Study Visit in Slovenia

22-23 May 2024

Introduction

This case study visit took place on 22-23 May 2024 in Ljubljana (Slovenia) as part of the social dialogue project [APRES COVID](#) - *European Sectoral Social Partners in Education Addressing Psychosocial Risks for an Equitable and Sustainable Recovery from the COVID-19 crisis*. The project, led by ETUCE and EFEE with the co-funding of the European Commission, constitutes a key action for the implementation of the [Work Programme 2024-2026](#) of the European Sectoral Social Dialogue Committee in Education (ESSDE). The case study visit, the first in a series of three national case studies, focused on two school visits—one primary and one secondary—and a national social dialogue meeting. The aims were twofold: firstly, to engage with teachers, school leaders, and other education personnel during the school visits to address the tangible effects of psychological risks, especially those exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Secondly, through the national social dialogue meeting with relevant social partners, the case study aimed to explore potential joint initiatives and opportunities for further cooperation in addressing psychological risks in education. The initiative also served as an opportunity to discuss good practices to enhance the working environment and mental health of teachers and education personnel.

This project activity included the participation of:

- APRES COVID Project Advisory Group members.
- The subcontracted research expert from the Visionary Analytics research team.
- Four members of the ETUCE and EFEE Secretariats.
- The subcontracted videomaker from Fermento.
- Slovenian Social Partners in Education, including:
 - Representatives of the Sindikat vzgoje, izobraževanja, znanosti in kulture Slovenije (Education, Science and Culture Trade Union of Slovenia, ESTUS) for the trade union side.
 - Representatives of the Zveza srednjih šol in dijaških domov Slovenije (Association of Secondary Schools and Student Dormitories of Slovenia) for the employer's side.
 - Ministry of Education of Slovenia.
- Representatives of the National Education Institute of Slovenia.
- The primary school Osnovna šola Dravljje, including interviews with:
 - The school principal.

- A teacher.
- Two school counsellors.
- A trade union delegate.
- The secondary school, including interviews with:
 - The school principal.
 - A teacher and deputy school principal.
 - The school counsellors.

The case study visit provided an insightful overview of the educational challenges faced during the COVID-19 pandemic and the long-term changes that the COVID-19 crisis triggered in the Slovenian education systems and industrial relations in education.

This report highlights key findings discussed that emerged during the discussion and interviews with the national stakeholders.

Immediate impact of the COVID-19 crisis

As the first immediate impact of the COVID-19 crisis, the interviews conducted in the two schools highlighted a significant change in the workload of teachers, school leaders, and education support personnel, while students' motivation and engagement declined, adversely affecting learning outcomes.

The unprecedented shift to online and remote teaching suddenly required teachers to use digital technology, often without prior experience. Teachers reported having spent numerous hours learning new teaching methods and tools. At the same time, the introduction of digital learning tools was described as a positive addition, not only to create a permanent repository to share educational material for students but also to foster collaboration among colleagues and share support messages that enhanced the bonding among staff. Conversely, hybrid teaching and learning implemented in Slovenia for one school year was widely regarded as pedagogically ineffective, with teachers finding it an experience not to repeat.



The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic was also visible in the work-life balance of education staff. Schools, particularly at the primary level, were inundated with requests from parents seeking information about various issues, which added to the already heightened stress levels of the teachers. The high demands of digitalisation extended

beyond regular working hours, with parents frequently contacting teachers in the evenings. Besides, working from home blurred boundaries between professional and personal life, leading to discomfort and a lack of personal space, with some education staff being initially reluctant to use cameras for virtual classes due to concerns over privacy and safety.

As reported by the interviewed stakeholders, the impact of the pandemic resulted in increased work-related stress, as well as deteriorating job satisfaction, mental health, trust, and self-esteem for education staff. The emergence of new stressors, such as managing work-life boundaries and dealing with constant digital demands, was also pointed out as teachers were forced to rethink their roles and adapt to the rapidly changing environment. Despite the challenges, teachers felt that the quality of their deliverables remained high.

The long-term impact of the COVID-19 crisis: Getting into a new normal

Despite an immediate improvement in well-being upon returning to school following the emergency period, Slovenian education staff expressed a shared feeling they had to adapt to a new normal rather than return to normal. As part of the long-lasting effect of the COVID-19 crisis, education staff in both Slovenian schools highlighted an increase in the workload and pressure on the role of the schools and education staff compared to the pre-pandemic levels. In this context, several interviewed education staff reported increased fatigue, cynicism, and emotional detachment persist in the aftermath of the COVID-19 crisis. As a result of the exhausting experience during the pandemic, many teachers, close to the end of their careers, decided to go on early retirement.

The interviews with Slovenian education staff further highlighted that children were the primary victims of the pandemic. In parallel, families often appear unable to cope with the children's demands and struggles, leading to greater expectations and reliance on schools. A rise in psychosocial problems, violent behaviours from students, along with learning loss as common challenges affect students. For instance, children in the first grade are experiencing speech difficulties and other developmental delays. This is accompanied by increased parents' expectations and interference in school activities, which are more prevalent in primary education than in secondary education, often leading to



education staff assuming roles beyond their traditional duties with increased work burden and workload.

The overburden on education staff is further caused by structural shortcomings such as the difficulties in accessing psychological services. Indeed, although the government has increased the number of school psychologists, more is needed to compensate for the growing challenges.

In primary education, improving school security by closing the main gate was described as one of the positive, long-lasting changes implemented during COVID-19.

The integration of digital tools in educational practices continued in the post-pandemic period, and both schools described it as a positive development to keep everything documented and facilitate cooperation among colleagues. As it emerged in the interviews, while several informal practices are in place to ensure a work-life balance of education staff (e.g., not replying to emails in the evening or during the weekends), both schools have yet to implement a policy or guidelines on the right to disconnect.

Nevertheless, emerging challenges linked to digitalisation were also highlighted due to growing episodes of cyber-harassment and the difficulties of critically surfing the abundance of information without getting overwhelmed. Indeed, in the aftermath of the COVID-19 crisis, the schools reported increased episodes of violence and harassment among students, especially cyberviolence and cyber-harassment. This has prompted, particularly, the secondary school to monitor social media for violent communication and foster social activities to build class bonds. No significant impact was reported on conflicts among coworkers. Conversely, teachers recognised the importance of working together and perceived a more open and cooperative environment.

A mixed picture emerged concerning job satisfaction. On the one hand, some interviewed education staff reported a decline in job satisfaction amid high workload and expectations and salaries not keeping pace with inflation. According to some teachers, although Slovenian society recognised the importance of teachers and all other education personnel during the pandemic, this appreciation quickly faded, leaving teachers feeling undervalued. On the other hand, several teachers and other education staff still reported finding satisfaction in their roles and schools, highlighting their dedication and commitment to education.



The role of social dialogue in education

Social dialogue at local, national, and European levels is instrumental in enhancing occupational well-being and mental health within the educational sector. The social dialogue meeting in the framework of the case study visit involved all national social partners in education, including education trade unions, education employers, and the Ministry of Education, alongside representatives of the European Sectoral Social Dialogue in Education (ESSDE).

During the meeting, the activities of the ESSDE on addressing psychosocial risks in education from an occupational health and safety perspective were presented together with the preliminary findings of the literature review on the state of play of psychosocial risks in the education sector.

The Ministry of Education of Slovenia highlighted that a shortage of teachers and school leaders as a significant issue affecting the education system. Several factors contributed to the low attractiveness



of the teaching profession, including psychosocial risks, high societal expectations, insufficient teacher replacement, and pressure from parents. Further research on parental intrusion in school activities was identified as necessary, as data from the Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) indicates an increase in this trend. This could be due to education no longer being the sole environment for knowledge acquisition.

According to available national data, work-related stress factors for education workers included the need for teachers to resolve problems faced by parents and students, maintain discipline in the classroom, handle high administrative workloads, and feel responsible for student achievements. Conversely, lesson preparation appeared to be less of a stress factor. Teachers' perception of how their profession is valued plays a critical role in their overall stress levels. The

Ministry has recognised that there is a need for more dialogue to address these issues effectively.

The Association of Secondary Schools and Student Dormitories of Slovenia highlighted the critical role of school leaders in promoting Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) and ensuring the well-being of teachers. The importance of school leaders having a clear vision and supporting teachers was highlighted. However, school leaders' representatives highlighted that their position in Slovenia faced challenges. The role, not equivalent to that of a civil servant, is marked by a high turnover and lack of attractiveness also due to inadequate salaries.

In this context, the Slovenian education employer representatives further emphasised that financial constraints should not be an excuse for inadequate support. Maintaining a fair reward system and promoting a productive environment that actively addresses psychosocial risks were key to ensuring a sustainable and supportive educational framework. Respectful communication was identified as an

important pillar on which further improvement is needed. Support in handling students with behavioural issues and special needs was identified as a significant area of need, alongside managing high parental expectations. As being a teacher involves high levels of autonomy but significant responsibilities at once, it was mentioned that some teachers are unaware of the support available to them. Professional development opportunities, particularly in soft skills and conflict resolution, were identified as essential to enhance teachers' competencies and confidence. Programs aimed at improving mental health and well-being were also recommended. School leaders promoted various well-being initiatives, including weekly stretching exercises, badminton sessions, language courses, safe driving courses, heart check-ups, internist examinations, and access to an oxygen chamber, as well as organising professional excursions and New Year's gatherings to foster a supportive and healthy work environment. However, it was noted that there was sometimes a lack of participation in these activities.



The Education, Science and Culture Trade Union of Slovenia highlighted there have been changes in workload and work-life balance, with the boundary between private and public life becoming blurred. The work has become emotionally draining, with screen addiction adding to the pressure. In the post-pandemic period, teachers were reported to have more face-to-face meetings with parents and individual support for students. Online and remote communication has led to lower satisfaction and increased mistrust among coworkers. While the trade union acknowledges that some of their proposals have been considered, mandatory supervisions remain a problem. Among the

recommendations to improve occupational well-being and mental health in education, education trade union representatives emphasised the need for comprehensive training, psychological support, and practical advice for educators. In-person work was preferred for its effectiveness in student interaction and learning outcomes. Mental health programs tailored to education staff needs were necessary to address the complexities of working with children, adolescents, and parents.



Effective classroom management requires concrete tools and measures involving students and parents in problem-solving. Increased supervision and better interdepartmental cooperation were

emphasised. Trade unions called for systemic regulation and clear protocols for dealing with educational problems, ensuring that professional services were accessible despite long waiting times. The immediate availability of psychiatrists and clinical psychologists was also highlighted as crucial to addressing the growing mental health needs among students and adolescents.

Support and good practices

The increase in horizontal and mutual support among staff was highlighted as an essential element that helped navigate the challenges posed by the crisis. Additionally, the importance of effective leadership was underscored, with school leaders playing a crucial role in supporting teachers during the pandemic. School leaders reported providing much-needed support and often receiving backing from their staff in return.

Support and resources offered by unions and professional networks of psychologists were also highlighted as crucial in providing necessary support. For instance, the annual conference for counsellors organised by the Counsellor Association proved beneficial, but despite freeing time away from work duties, remained challenging. Emphasis on support networks reinforced that the awareness of education is inherently a social and personal contact-driven field, where feeling cared for is essential.

At the institutional level, close cooperation was reported with the municipality, particularly in primary education. For instance, the municipality of Ljubljana offered legal support to schools in legal undertakings by some parents against the measures (e.g., testing and masks) implemented by schools during the pandemic. The Ministry of Education offered guidelines, and the Slovenian Education Network provided valuable resources. Despite these efforts, both visited schools agreed that support from the ministerial level was perceived as lacking and slow (see more on the Ministerial activities in the next section). More recent activities implemented at the Ministerial level to improve occupational well-being and mental health in education include:

- A hybrid project involving 63 schools, offering 100 hours of training over three years. This project includes four obligatory modules and over 300 exercises and resources aimed at staff development. Resources are specifically provided to help teachers manage students with mental disorders. The National Institution of Education is also focusing on inclusive management practices, which have proved effective.
- Continuous Professional Development (CPD) opportunities anchored the education and training system on a legal basis and through collective agreements with teachers and education staff. Each year, the Ministry develops a catalogue of training opportunities, with over 70% of training developed to address the well-being of teachers, particularly in response to predefined stress factors.
- The National Mental Health Programme 2018-2028 aims to promote mental health and prevent mental disorders among children and adolescents through coordinated efforts with other ministries. This initiative includes action plans to enhance skills for working with parents, overcoming anxiety, treating non-chemical addictions, and preventing suicidal behaviours.

- The National Education Programme 2023-2033 focuses on creating a safe and stimulating environment that supports social and emotional learning and enhances the relational competence of educational staff. Key areas include improving communication during crisis events, supporting teacher autonomy, and promoting individual development. Feedback is currently being collected to refine these initiatives further.
- An upcoming project aims to reduce administrative tasks to further alleviate teacher stress.



Several initiatives were also implemented at the school level in response to the crisis:

- **Task Group Formation:** During the pandemic, the primary school established a task group on the initiative of the school staff, comprising psychologists, teachers, computer experts, and school counsellors. This initiative was instrumental in fostering dialogue and cooperation to manage the crisis effectively.
- **Health Projects for Teachers:** A project focused on teachers' health was introduced. As part of their vocational education and training activities, the visited secondary school offered options for sports activities, such as skiing in winter and cycling. These activities, done together with teachers, aimed to promote physical health and reinforce team spirit.
- **Safe Educational Environment Project:** Schools ran projects to encourage a safe educational environment for children and students. These projects focused on topics such as non-violent communication, conflict resolution, and addressing violent behaviours. A dedicated group met regularly to prepare tasks and exercises for children, emphasising relaxation and collaboration among teachers.

Looking ahead: the needs for a Sustainable Recovery

To ensure a sustainable recovery from the COVID-19 crisis in Slovenia's education sector, a series of suggestions were collected from the interviewed education staff and education social partners regarding areas for attention and improvement to counter psychosocial risks:

Firstly, students' mental health remains a significant concern. The digitalisation changes introduced during the pandemic have become a lasting part of the educational landscape, and addressing these areas will be crucial for a resilient and effective educational system in the post-pandemic world.

One significant issue identified was the long waiting list to access specialists, such as psychologists. This delay necessitates preventive measures and quicker joint responses from social services, the police, and the Ministry of Education, with a focus on more action and fewer procedural delays.

The need to reduce parental interference in educational matters was emphasized, as excessive involvement can be detrimental to the educational process. Teachers and schools also reported struggling with paperwork and administrative tasks, which adds to their burden. Therefore, there is a pressing need to reduce this load and streamline processes, allowing teachers, school leaders, and education support staff to focus more on teaching and the students while reducing bureaucratic requirements.

The Slovenian education staff and social partners further highlighted the need for increased autonomy for teachers and schools. More investment is needed to support continuous professional development (CPD), including efforts to reduce barriers to accessibility, such as the lack of time for teachers and ensuring its gratuity. With rising inflation, financial resources and salaries need to be adapted to match the increasing cost of living.

Education staff emphasised the importance of bridging the gap between school-level operations and the Ministry of Education for smoother functioning. While rules are necessary, an overly rigid framework can be counterproductive. Simplifying educational legal policies could be beneficial, given that many laws—up to 200—apply to school environments. Schools need more autonomy, particularly in budgetary matters, to manage their resources effectively. Thus, a human approach beyond strict regulations is essential for a supportive educational environment.

The interviews underscored a strong call for granting more authority and legal autonomy to schools, coupled with higher financial resources, including better salaries and comfortable spaces for discussions. By addressing these critical areas, Slovenia can work towards a more sustainable and resilient educational system that supports both teachers and students in the post-pandemic era.
