



# **When the schools shut down: COVID-19 pandemic and inequality of opportunity among school- leavers**

A case study on the forms of inequality of opportunity that have emerged among the school-leavers in the city of Siauliai, Lithuania due to the COVID-19 pandemic and

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## PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Coming from a small village with virtually non-existent career opportunities, high level of unemployment among the villagers and very few incentives to pursue higher education, I had been ‘introduced’ to the instances of inequality of opportunity regarding the satisfactory access to education before I even understood what that was. Thinking retrospectively, I clearly remember some of my childhood friends skipping and missing lessons during the harvest period to make some money, and their parents ignorantly telling them that there was no need to go to university after school because their career paths as tractor-drivers or cattle farmers had already been decided for them in advance – the fact that those friends of mine were some of the best students at school with different and high-reaching ambitions did not make much difference at that time. As the years went by and we were growing older and (hopefully) wiser, the witnessed challenges of inequality of opportunity persisted and acquired different forms and shapes such as some families’ failure to meet financial standards required in order to buy their children computers and pay for the internet service, or the inability of students to have a personal space or a spare room for studying at home after the lessons as the workloads of individual learning and homework were constantly increasing every year. The aforementioned experiences had most definitely played a significant role in turning my long-established interest in and a close personal connection with the topic of inequality of opportunity into the main subject of analysis of my master’s thesis. I firmly believe that this paper not only sheds a light on the inequalities of opportunity regarding the access to education but also presents specific measures that could be employed to address this problem at least partially. This paper is a result of a great team effort and therefore I would like to express my thankfulness to the people that were of immeasurable help during the process.

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discussions, companionship, and close cooperation with my fellow students: they helped me grow in many respects, and I hope that I was of at least some assistance to them. Finally, I would like to express sincere gratitude to my colleagues for allowing me to go on a thesis-writing vacation and taking a great care of the city of Siauliai; my family that has been by my side during both the highest and the lowest moments; my friends Aleksandras, Ignas, Oleg and Sanya for the motivational speeches that would make even the best public speakers jealous; and my girlfriend Auguste for making sure that the world would always be beautiful despite sleepless nights spent writing this paper.

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## 2 Abstract

It could be reasonably argued by now (as of June 2021) that the global COVID-19 pandemic has significantly affected almost every aspect of everyday life: from cancelled events and changes in working habits to social distancing and closed borders not only between, but sometimes also within the countries. Among others, educational systems around the world have also been exposed to significant challenges during the pandemic with the closure of educational institutions unprecedentedly disrupting the learning process of almost 1.6 billion students around the world and hitting the vulnerable the hardest. This paper focuses on the challenges that the educational sector has been exposed to during the COVID-19 pandemic and presents a case study of the city of Siauliai, the fourth largest city in Lithuania. The research places a specific emphasis on the last year upper secondary education students by analysing the conditions under which they have been preparing for the state-level leaving examinations during the pandemic, and the forms of inequality that have emerged due to the closure of schools and transition to remote learning. This study employs the theory of inequality of opportunity as the theoretical approach and illustrates that the school-leavers have experienced the transition to online classes and closure of the educational institutions differently: while a general negative impact on the academic achievements and lack of motivation has been witnessed among the school-leavers irrespectively of their socioeconomic status, school-leavers from socioeconomically more vulnerable families have struggled disproportionately due to the inability to ensure appropriate conditions to study at home; lack of parental support; and financial shortcomings in the forms of incapability to afford tutors in order to fill gaps in knowledge, as the access to academic assistance and consultations from the teachers after lessons has become highly limited due to their dramatically increased workloads during the pandemic. By following the prescriptive and normative nature of the theory of inequality of opportunity, this thesis also presents a particular initiative that has been put in place in the city of Siauliai based on the findings of this study and aimed at addressment of the identified problems at least partially.

### 3 Introduction

In late 2019 first cases of the novel human coronavirus disease (later termed as COVID-19) were reported in Wuhan City, China. It is believed that bats are the natural hosts of COVID-19 and it is a result of a spillover of an animal coronavirus that has modified and acquired capability of human-to-human transmission. Symptoms of COVID-19 include fever, dry cough, difficult breathing, and this disease is greatly contagious. Due to the latter characteristic of the COVID-19, this coronavirus has spread all over the world already in the beginning of 2020 (Liu Y-C et al., 2020, p. 1, 2). On March 12, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) announced the outburst of COVID-19 a pandemic (WHO, n.d.) and at the time of writing of this paper (May 1, 2021, 15:47) the total number of confirmed COVID-19 cases is more than 147 and a half million in addition to more than 3.1 million registered global deaths (European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, n.d.). Worldwide spread of the coronavirus is also illustrated by the fact that by May, 2021 only the Federated States of Micronesia - an island country with a population of under 105 thousand - out of all the states that provide information regarding their respective epidemiological situations to the WHO, had no reported COVID-19 cases. There are, however, additional parts of the world that fall into this category of the so-called “COVID-19-free states” but foreign analysts have been reasonably sceptical towards them as the list further includes countries such as Turkmenistan and North Korea - states that, according to the Human Rights Watch, remain some of the most closed and oppressive (Human Rights Watch, 2020), and, in the case of Turkmenistan, even strongly avoid the word “coronavirus” itself (Reporters Without Borders, 2020).

It goes without saying, that COVID-19 has already had enormous impact on the healthcare systems around the world as well as the global development, and negative effects of this pandemic will most likely be long-lasting: in mid-April, 2020 the International Monetary Fund (IMF, 2020) predicted that the so-called Great Lockdown would be the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression. Moreover, healthcare systems of the states across the globe are facing major new challenges (Médecins Sans Frontières MSF, 2020) that are not limited to the containment of the spread of the COVID-19, but rather deal with the “secondary” effects of it as, for instance, around one-third of the world's total population is likely to



develop strong levels of stress, anxiety, anger and depression (World Economic Forum, 2020).

To make the picture painted by the COVID-19 pandemic even bleaker, the future global development is further hindered by the great challenges that the educational sector is confronted with in the context of this coronavirus. Schools together with universities as well as other educational institutions are to the day of writing of this paper closed in large numbers (UNESCO, n.d): it was reported that by April, 2020, 91% of the students worldwide had been affected by the temporary closing down of the schools – this number has never been this high before (United Nations, 2020a, p. 2). In addition to that, the transition to online learning and teaching that followed the closure of educational institutions is challenging to both the teachers and the students: while students suffer from increased levels of stress, lack of motivation and spend less time learning, teachers experience problems with accessing the new technologies, as the majority of them had never been involved in online teaching before (Di Pietro et al., 2020, p. 28). It is also predicted that the global COVID-19 pandemic will threaten the already-made achievements in developing global education as closure of schools hits the most vulnerable the hardest (United Nations, 2020a, p. 2).

The latter theme, namely educational sector challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic is also at the centre of the study of this paper. As the COVID-19 spread and the epidemiological situation are both significantly dynamic and place-specific, the following study seeks to shed a light on and contribute to the existing knowledge in the field of the current (as of June, 2021) coronavirus-related school closures in the city of Siauliai, Lithuania and the inequality that the closure has resulted in among the school-leavers. This paper employs a normative and prescriptive approach and therefore, apart from the methodological and theoretical considerations, a student-assistive initiative that was established in the city of Siauliai and was based on the findings of this study, is also presented and suggested as a possible path to follow.

## 4 Problem area

In a similar manner to most parts of the world, Lithuania announced a nation-wide quarantine in mid-March 2020 suspending all educational as well as childcare activities. From March 16 – the first day of the quarantine – to March 27 all educational institutions were entirely closed, and schools, universities, colleges and kindergartens were given 11 days to prepare for remote learning (Government of the Republic of Lithuania, 2020). Transition to online education was not entirely smooth to say the least as the online teaching platform crashed on the very first day it was launched (Lithuanian National Broadcaster, 2020a). Learning from home also exposed the long-established and prevailing problems of poverty in Lithuania – at the time of the first schools' closure, 10% of the total school students were from socioeconomically vulnerable families (with parents unemployed or paid less than a minimum wage) that had no access to computers or internet services at the time the quarantine was announced (Lithuanian National Broadcaster, 2020b). Consequently, 35 thousand computers were handed out to the schools in need (ibid.) School closures also meant an increased risk of hunger for the most vulnerable families as the daily school meals were no longer provided for the students in need.

Arguably, however, the most severely impacted group of students during the coronavirus lockdown were the school-leavers of the upper secondary education institutions – pupils at the age between 17 and 19 whose last semester in the school both began and finished during the first lockdown of the educational institutions. Apart from the aforementioned challenges that students in general have experienced during the quarantine due to the closure of educational institutions, school-leavers were also facing a high possibility of long-term losses in their abilities to set a foundation for their future careers. It is important to note that in March, 2020, a month when the lockdown of educational institutions in Lithuania began, the school-leavers were only three months away from taking their leaving examinations (State-level Matura examinations), meaning that preparation process for the most important tests in their 12-year educational 'journey' (Centre for quality assessment in higher education, n.d.) was to proceed using malfunctioning national online teaching programmes; online classrooms characterized by a restricted contact with either the teachers or the classmates; and, sometimes, even a limited access to the textbooks, computers or the internet connection. Upper secondary education institutions in Lithuania were reopened for fourteen days on 1 June, 2020 – only

two weeks before the end of the school year (Lithuanian National Broadcaster, 2020c), leaving virtually no time for the most vulnerable students to fill the gaps in their knowledge through direct consultation with their teachers and peers. It is necessary to stress the fact that in 2020 successful completion of both the curriculum and the examinations remained the only way to get the access to higher education in Lithuania (Centre for quality assessment in higher education, n.d.), regardless of the conditions under which one had to study during the COVID-19 pandemic.

State-level Matura examinations performance of ‘the first COVID-19 class of 2020’ was unprecedentedly poor as, for instance, nearly one-third of all school-leavers (almost 5000 pupils) did not even reach the minimum score in the math exam - the percentage of pupils that failed math exam in 2020 was the highest since 2013 (Lithuanian National Broadcaster, 2020d), the year when the current evaluation system was introduced (European Commission, 2020). Only 67.8 % passed the math exam in 2020 compared to 82% in 2019 (Lithuanian National Broadcaster, 2020d). The math exam is particularly illustrative in this context as from 2016 onwards, only the school-leavers that pass this particular exam are eligible to apply for state-funded study programmes of higher education (European Commission, 2020), meaning that in 2020 almost 5000 pupils also faced additional financial barriers to acquisition of higher education due to historically poor performance in the exams during the pandemic.

However, it would be reasonable to state that the challenges faced by the school-leavers in 2020, together with the resulting dramatic consequences, were merely the tip of the iceberg compared to the problems witnessed by “the second COVID-19 class of 2021” that are set to take the state-level Matura examinations in June and July, 2021. While the class of school-leavers of 2020 faced school closures from mid-March to the beginning of June, 2020, (approximately 2.5 months) and took their examinations in June and July; the class of school-leavers of 2021, as a result of the second coronavirus wave, switched to the online learning from mid-November (in some municipalities even from the end of September), 2020 and only returned to in-person learning on 10 May, 2021 (after around 6 months of remote learning) with the Matura examinations session beginning on 7 June, 2021 (Lithuanian National Broadcaster, 2020d). Worrying tendencies of continuously deteriorating learning and teaching quality during the pandemic have become particularly evident when the school-leavers took a preliminary math examination in mid-April 2021 as a preparatory measure for the Matura

examinations. At that time, the average score of around 14 thousand exam-takers was 40% out of 100%, meaning that, on average, the school-leavers passed the exams with the scores that are almost lower than the basic level of attainment (European Commission, 2020). As the National Agency for Education informed in April 2021, the level of difficulty of the exams will not be lowered despite the pandemic (Lithuanian National Broadcaster, 2020e) and only 15 minutes extension will be given for each examination (National Agency for Education, n.d.).

This paper focuses on the class of the school-leavers of 2021 in the city of Siauliai, Lithuania, and seeks to shed a light on the complexities of the transition to remote learning due to COVID-19 pandemic by placing the emphasis on the two aforementioned themes, namely the great weight that the last school year carries regarding the school-leavers' chances of acquiring higher education and the underlying inequalities in a form of possibly differing challenges that the last year students face due to their respective socioeconomic backgrounds. In its essence, this study attempts to dig deeper into the remote learning phenomenon by placing the above-mentioned notion that the closure of schools hits the most vulnerable the hardest at its centre. Additionally, this paper also offers possible measures that have already been employed in the city of Siauliai, Lithuania in order to address the problem of unequal opportunities for the school-leavers to properly prepare for the Matura examinations. From the equality of opportunity (to satisfactorily prepare for the examinations) perspective, this master thesis seeks to answer the 4.1

#### 4.1 Research questions and sub-questions

*How do the challenges posed by the closure of educational institutions during the quarantine differ between school-leavers from socially disadvantaged families and families that are socioeconomically better off in Siauliai, Lithuania?*

##### **Sub-questions:**

1. What are the main challenges that the school-leavers from socially disadvantaged families face due to the closure of educational institutions and transition to remote learning?

2. What are the main challenges that the school-leavers from socioeconomically better-off families face due to the closure of educational institutions and transition to remote learning?
3. What are some of the main differences between the two?
4. What measures could be taken to address the problems of inequality in this context (if such problems are present in the first place)?

## 5 Geographic study area and context for the thesis

### 5.1 General overview and socioeconomic indicators of the city

Since the research design of the study of this paper is a case study (Chapter Research strategy and Chapter Research design and methodology), elaboration on the contextual spatial and temporal details of the subject of analysis is of central importance. Consequently, the following part presents contextual information on the area in which the study presented in this paper takes place.

Firstly, it is important to note that the cities in Lithuania are classified into three different categories in accordance with their respective population indicators: small cities (population from 3 to 10 thousand), medium-sized cities (population from 10 to 100 thousand), and big cities (population of more than 100 thousand) (Dringelis, 2013, p. 314). With a population of 101,862 as of January 2021 (Lithuanian Department of Statistics, n.d.a), the city of Siauliai falls into the latter category, and therefore will be further presented and analysed in comparison and the context of other cities within this category (of Lithuania's big cities), namely Klaipeda, Kaunas and Vilnius. The only exception of the following part, however, is inclusion of the city of Panevezys in this part of the study: Panevezys held a status of a big city until 2012, and with its population of 85, 885 as of January 2020 (Lithuanian Department of Statistics, n.d.a), is comparable to the city of Siauliai size-wise.

The city of Siauliai is the centre of the Northern Lithuania region and it is ranked as the fourth largest city in Lithuania. Due to its strategically advantageous geographical location (the city is located within 165 kilometres distance from Klaipeda and Kaunas, the third and the second largest cities in Lithuania respectively, 220 kilometres from Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania, and is less than 130 kilometres away from Riga, the capital city of Latvia) (Siauliai city municipality, n.d.), Siauliai has historically been a strong production industry and trade centre of the region (Kiaupa & Nikzentaitis, n.d.). For its industrial and productive strength, the city of Siauliai to this day (as of April, 2021) has the lowest unemployment rate among the largest cities of the country (Employment Service Under the Ministry of Social Security and Labour of the Republic of Lithuania, n.d.) and has the fastest Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) growth in the same group of cities (Lithuanian Department of Statistics, n.d. in Siauliai city municipality, 2021, p. 9).

However, it would be erroneous to paint the status of the city of Siauliai as an industrial production city in predominantly bright colours. It is important to note, that due to the dominance of labour rather than knowledge intensive sectors in the city, Siauliai lags behind all of the largest cities in terms of salaries and education of the citizens. It is particularly illustrative that the three largest cities in Lithuania, namely Vilnius, Kaunas and Klaipeda stand at the top of the table of the highest-salary municipalities in the country (as of 2020Q4) but the city of Siauliai, despite being the fourth largest city in the country, is only ranked 18th and is far behind not only from the national average and the city of Panevezys (ranked 9th), but also some of the significantly smaller municipalities that, for instance, do not have any higher education institutions (The Lithuanian Department of Statistics, n.d.b). Additionally, with the COVID-19 pandemic, local labour market of the city of Siauliai has not only been characterized by comparatively lower salaries, but also by a rapidly increasing unemployment, confirming the findings of the United Nations (UN) that the low-skilled workers are among the most severely affected due to the pandemic (United Nations, 2020b). The so-called Great Lockdown of COVID-19 caused the unemployment in the city of Siauliai to significantly increase from 6.4% in December 2019 to 10.9% in April 2021 (Employment Service Under the Ministry of Social Security and Labour of the Republic of Lithuania, n.d). Dominance of labour-intensive sectors (construction, transportation, maintenance, and processing are the dominant industries in the city) (the Siauliai city municipality, 2021, p. 9) and relatively low demand for skill-intensive labour has also resulted into low levels of education of the local citizenry. In 2020, there were 138.5 thousand people aged from 25 to 64 with any level of education in the entire Siauliai region (Siauliai city municipality together with neighbouring municipalities), out of which only 45.4 thousand (around 32.7%) had higher education. In comparison, in the same year the percentage of citizens with higher education in relation to people with any level of education in the regions of other three great cities of Lithuania was significantly higher: in Klaipeda region this proportion stood at around 45.7%, in Kaunas region - approximately 47.5%, and in Vilnius region this number reached over 58.5% (Lithuanian Department of Statistics, n.d.c). It is striking that the proportion of citizenry with higher education in Panevezys region is relatively close to the region of Siauliai and stands at 29.6 %, even though the region of Siauliai has had the Siauliai university since 1997 (from 2021 - Vilnius university Siauliai academy) and the region of Panevezys has never had a university in the region. Moreover, it is highly likely that the proportion of citizens with higher education in the city and the region of Siauliai will further decrease in the

upcoming years: statistics indicate that the total number of students (students from Siauliai state college and Vilnius university Siauliai academy combined) in the city of Siauliai dropped by almost 50% from 5138 students in 2016 to 2610 students in 2020 (The Lithuanian Department of Statistics, n.d.d).

The statistics above indicate that generally and from the perspective of the socioeconomic indicators, the city of Siauliai on average has significantly lower levels of the salaries received by the working age citizenry; a comparatively larger share of workers in labour rather than knowledge intensive sectors; and inferior educational attainment of the local adults in relation to comparable cities and regions in Lithuania. In addition to that, rapidly growing unemployment rate after the first cases of COVID-19 were reported in Lithuania, illustrates that the city of Siauliai has been highly affected by the market disruptions caused by the pandemic.

## 5.2 The school-leavers class of 2021 in the city of Siauliai

In a more specific context of the educational sector and the class of school-leavers of 2021 in the city of Siauliai, it is important to note that there are ten upper secondary (Map 1) institutions in the city with the total number of the last year students (school-leavers) of 1260 (Siauliai city open data, n.d.). Students in the city of Siauliai are enrolled to the schools in accordance with the geographical proximity, meaning that the pupils attend the schools that are the nearest to their places of residence. Exceptions exist only in the cases when students want to change their schools and if the schools that they want to continue the learning at have vacancies (Personal communication with the representative from the Siauliai city municipality, May 25, 2021).

In terms of the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on the learning process of the school-leavers, the city of Siauliai has been a particularly exceptional and sensitive case. As was mentioned previously, the class of school-leavers of 2021 in the majority of the municipalities in Lithuania switched to the online learning from mid-November, 2020, with a handful of municipalities switching already from the end of September, 2020, and only returned to in-person learning on 10 May, 2021 (after around 6 months of remote learning, and in some municipalities after almost 8 months). Due to the dramatically increasing numbers of new reported COVID-19 cases during the second wave of the pandemic and severe



epidemiological situation, the city of Siauliai fell into the category of the few municipalities (there were no other big cities in this category) that switched to the online learning the earliest (September 28, 2020), meaning that the school-leavers from the city of Siauliai spent almost 8 out of total 9 months of the school year learning from home.

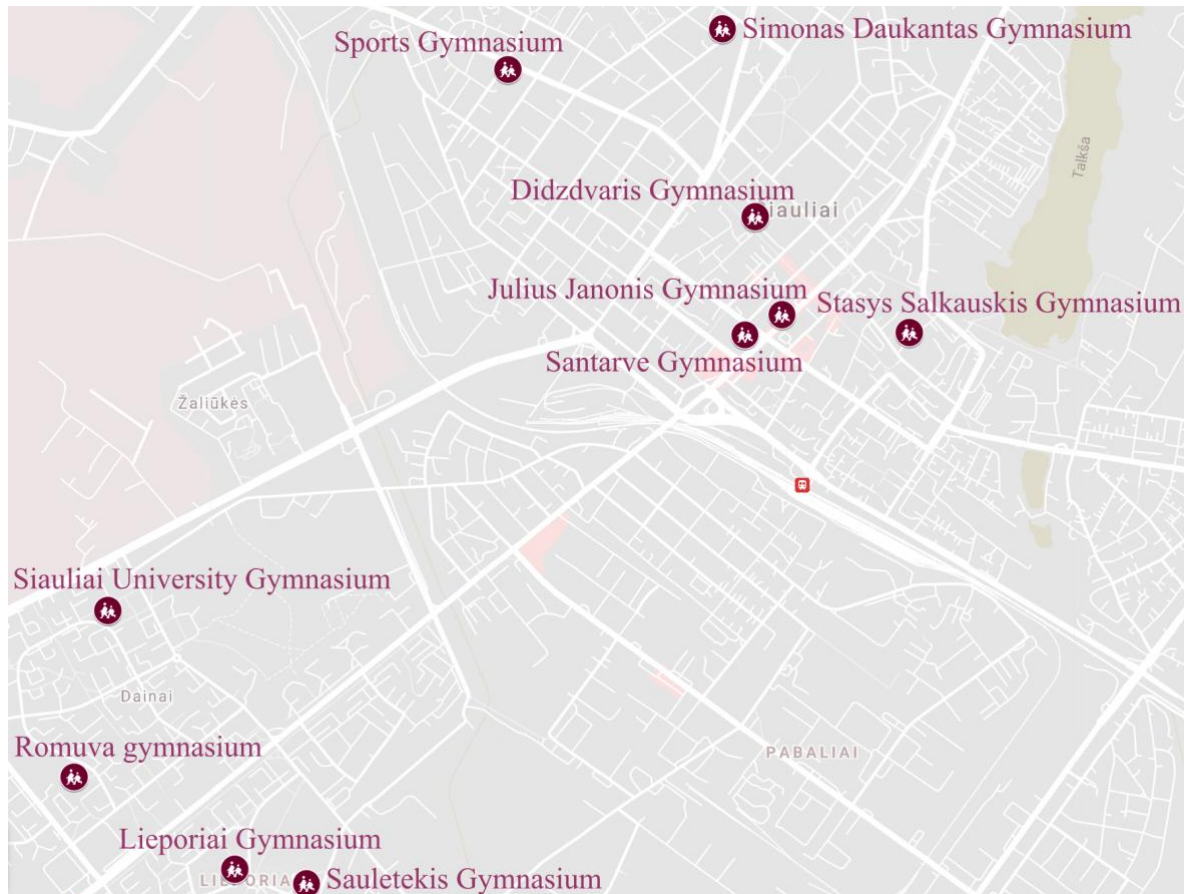


Figure 1. Map of upper secondary education institutions in the city of Siauliai.

This part of the paper presented the contextual information of the case studied and illustrated that the school-leavers from the city of Siauliai have been an exceptional case in Lithuania in the context of the remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic due to an earlier closure of the upper secondary education institutions during the second wave of the pandemic compared to other municipalities. Additionally, in relation to other comparable municipalities, the citizenry of Siauliai in general is also more vulnerable in regard to the socioeconomic factors such as salaries received; educational attainment among adults; and, increasingly, risks of unemployment.

The next part introduces the research strategy for this study and shows the way in which an attempt to answer the research questions is made in this paper.

## 6 Research strategy

The following part of the paper presents the strategy of the research or, as Jensen and Kvist (2016, p. 39) put it - “the master plan for the research” that illustrates the progression from the initial formulation of the research question, selection of the theoretical approach as well as data collection to the analysis and conclusion. Research strategy of this study consists of seven main elements: (1) problem formulation; (2) literature review; (3) theoretical framework; (4) methodology; (5) analysis; (6) proposed means of solution to the identified problems from a normative and prescriptive perspective; (7) discussion and conclusion. Research strategy of this paper is presented in the figure below.

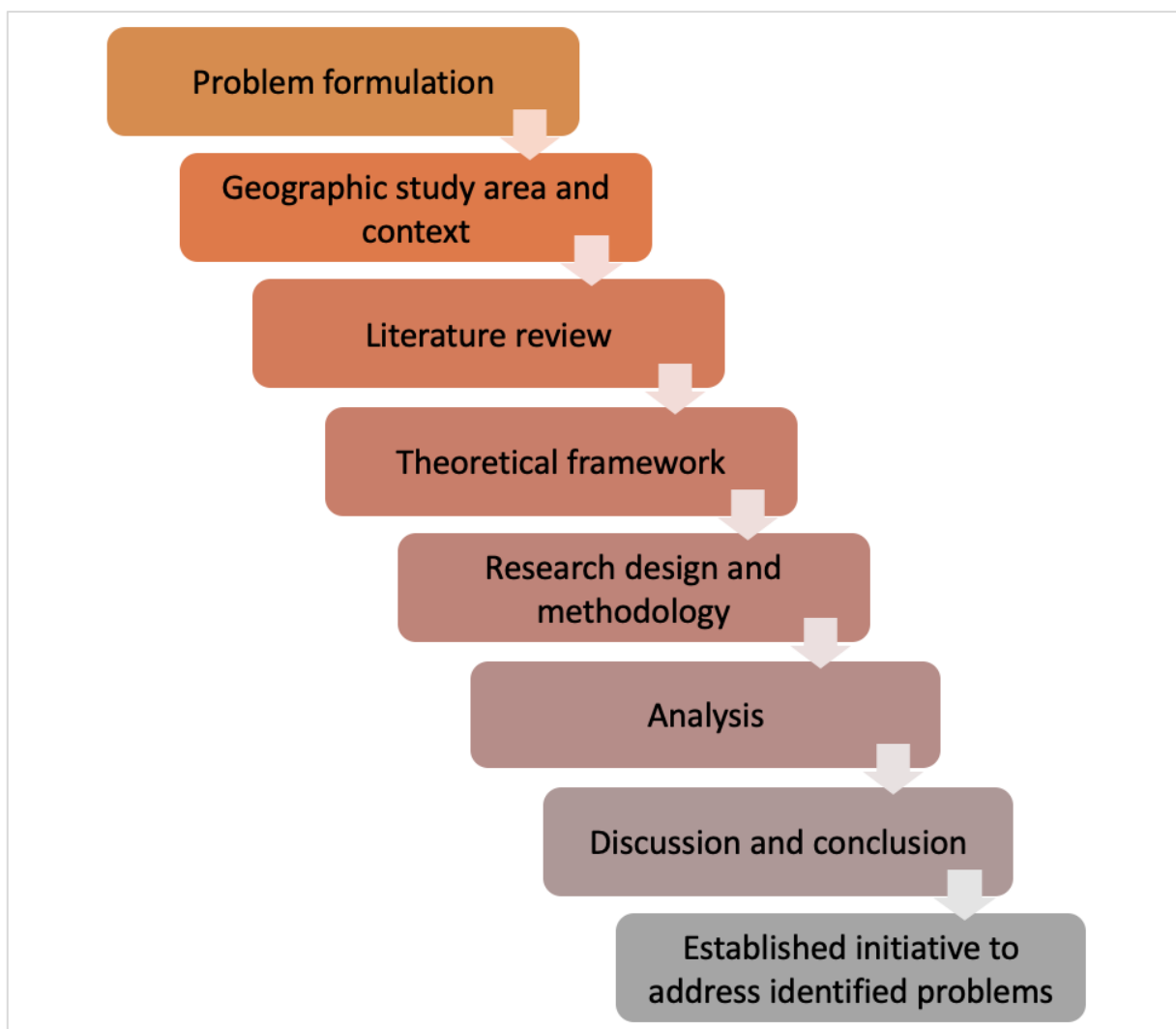


Figure 2. Structure of the research strategy.

The first task that every researcher takes up in the initial phases of research is the identification of the research area that he or she seeks to study more thoroughly. As Bryman (2016, p. 86) indicates, the research area and the subsequent formulation of the research problem are oftentimes highly related to the researcher's own fields of interest, and this study is not an exception. Following Bryman's (ibid., p. 88) list of the types of sources from which such "attraction" to a specific research area derives from, three of them are of particular importance to this paper.

1. Personal interest/experience. As a public servant in general and an advisor to the mayor in particular, I was personally partially involved in the municipal processes of adjustment to the significantly changed educational circumstances due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It goes without saying, that the hardships of school communities witnessed from the first day of the closure of educational institutions served as one of the initial factors that subsequently led to the selection of this specific research area. Decision to select the case of the school-leavers' class of 2021 was made due to the significant weight that the last school-year carries for the pupils in relation to their ability to further pursue education (for example, getting enrolled to higher education institutions) and therefore, has an immense influence on their ability to successfully lay the foundation for future career prospects.
2. New developments in society. It goes without saying, that a widespread virus and the resulting global pandemic was an unprecedented phenomenon with the full scope of its consequences still to be seen in the future. It is arguably becoming increasingly difficult to disagree with the famous phrase of the winner of the Pulitzer Prize for Explanatory Journalism, science journalist Laurie Garret, who, in May, 2020, stated that "<...> four, five years from now there will not be a single aspect of our lives that's been unchanged" (Garret, 2020 in The Chartered Institute of Journalists, 2020). Indeed, the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic undoubtedly illustrated that education is already among the aspects of life that has undergone dramatic changes with the aforementioned school closures and transition to remote learning affecting the highest number of students worldwide in history (United Nations, 2020a, p. 2). The sudden societal changes caused by the COVID-19 pandemic have resulted in a situation where far-reaching societal changes and developments are observed across the globe and yet they are still highly understudied with a scarce amount of scientific research present. In a specific way, this paper is highly inspired by the need to shed a light on the new societal developments as

well as challenges and contribute to the existing knowledge in the field of education during the pandemic.

3. Social and developmental problem. This study places a great emphasis on the social problem of inequality in the context of the school leavers' access to education and their ability to prepare for the Matura examinations during the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, education undoubtedly plays a significant role in development processes as it is seen as a foundational element of sustainable (economic) development and progress (Ozturk, 2001, p. 8); a prerequisite for an upward socioeconomic mobility and personal growth (United Nations, n.d.; European Commission, n.d.); and a source of innovations as well as scientific research (European Commission, n.d.). Bearing in mind the great importance of education and a need for an equal access to it, this paper attempts to not only to describe the current state of affairs in the context of school-leavers' challenges and identify the predominant problems experienced due to the closure of educational institutions, but also has as one of its motives an attempt to at least partially solve the existent problem from a prescriptive point of view by offering a concrete initiative that could be applied on a wider scope.

As the subject of study was indicated and a decision was made to focus on the differing challenges experienced by the school-leavers in Siauliai, the subsequent part of the paper presented contextual information regarding the selected case. Consequently, the part of this paper on the geographic study area and context for the thesis provided the paper with a more detailed and nuanced understanding of the socioeconomic factors that are characteristic to the city of Siauliai, namely comparatively lower levels of educational attainment; lower wages; and rapidly increased unemployment during the pandemic.

The following parts of this paper that deal with the theoretical framework and the literature review are predominantly concerned with two things: (1.) establishment of theoretical conceptual 'lenses' through which the subject analysis will subsequently be studied; (2.) and the role that this study could occupy in relation to the existing knowledge in the field. Theoretical framework of the theory of (in)equality of opportunity in the context of this study placed a central emphasis on the external factors (parental occupation, household income; parental support etc.) that are outside of one's control but nevertheless have significant effect on one's opportunities to successfully participate in the educational processes during the

pandemic on equal terms with others. This notion together with the idea of the need of levelling the metaphorical ‘playing field’ are reflected in the research question which seeks to shed a light on the differencing challenges experienced by the school leavers as a result of differing external factors (socioeconomic status of school leavers’ respective families); the interview guide; and throughout the analysis phase.

In order to answer the research question, case study was operationalized as the research design for its focus on detailed and in-depth examinations of specific cases. The case study research design complements the formulation of the research question as this specific research design, as will be show in the following chapters, is particularly suitable when ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions are posed. In order to find the answers to the research question, semi-structured interviews were conducted with highly experienced tutors of the school-leavers’ classes and education experts from the Siauliai City Municipality. The emphasis was placed on the detailed an elaborate responses and accounts of the interviewees that have resulted into a substantial volume of transcripts. As the level of familiarization with the collected data grew, the thematic qualitative content analysis of the transcribed interviews began with an objective to shed a light on the most frequently emerging themes, identify patterns and illustrate newly established as well as originally unanticipated elements emerging from the interviews.

The following parts of the paper deal with the analysis and the discussion of the findings. Analysis is highly related to the other parts of the paper as both theoretical and contextual elements are extensively included in the interpretation of the results in order to illustrate ‘the bigger picture’ of the case studied. The part of the presentation of the findings provides the answer to the research question posed in this paper and indicates that the answer to the research question does not entirely fit with the initially formulated research sub-questions. Such problem was a result of the inductive approach employed by the proponents of the qualitative content analysis and the idea that the data collected is capable of altering the research questions and even the research interests.

The final part of this paper presents the initiative that was established in the city of Siauliai as a result of the findings of this paper and followed the normative and prescriptive nature of the theory of (in)equality of opportunity. The main goal of the initiative was to equalize the

metaphorical ‘playing field’ by setting up a platform that would provide quality academic assistance for the school-leavers during their free time and for free in order for them to better prepare for the Matura examinations and fill the existing gaps in knowledge. Additionally, the initiative is also aimed at motivating and guiding the school-leavers as well as creating circumstances for new friendships to be made with the peers from other schools in the city.

The last part of the paper concludes.

It is important to note that the original research strategy has been significantly changed due to the COVID-19 pandemic and just like the coronavirus itself, it went in waves. The largest part of this paper was written during the periods of a relative ‘relief’ in regards to the spread of the virus: in June, May and end-April, 2021 while from September, 2020 to the beginning of April, 2021 I could hardly get a spare evening to sit by the relevant textbooks as I was voluntarily checking the people in self-isolation when more than 3% of the total population of the city were having the COVID-19. Due to the time constraints and immense workload in the emergency relief sector, I have failed to include an elaborate account on the limitations and the delimitations of this study. However, it is clear that the greatest of them has been the virus.

## 6.1 Identification of the research area and problem formulation

The first task that every researcher takes up in the initial phases of research is the identification of the research area that he or she seeks to study more thoroughly. As Bryman (2016, p. 86) indicates, the research area and the subsequent formulation of the research problem are oftentimes highly related to the researcher’s own fields of interest, and this study is not an exception. Following Bryman’s (ibid., p. 88) list of the types of sources from which such “attraction” to a specific research area derives from, three of them are of particular importance to this paper.

4. Personal interest/experience. As a public servant in general and an advisor to the mayor in particular, I was personally involved in the municipal processes of adjustment to the significantly changed educational circumstances due to the COVID-19 pandemic. During the first closure of educational institutions, I was held responsible for organizing the communication between the schools of the city of Siauliai and the municipality. It goes

without saying, that the hardships of school communities witnessed from the first day of the closure of educational institutions served as one of the initial factors that subsequently led to the selection of this specific research area. Decision to select the case of the school-leavers' class of 2021 was made due to the significant weight that the last school-year carries for the pupils in relation to their ability to further pursue education (for example, getting enrolled to higher education institutions) and therefore, has an immense influence on their ability to successfully lay the foundation for future career prospects.

5. New developments in society. It goes without saying, that a widespread virus and the resulting global pandemic was an unprecedented phenomenon with the full scope of its consequences still to be seen in the future. It is arguably becoming increasingly difficult to disagree with the famous phrase of the winner of the Pulitzer Prize for Explanatory Journalism, science journalist Laurie Garret, who, in May, 2020, stated that “<...> four, five years from now there will not be a single aspect of our lives that's been unchanged” (Garret, 2020 in The Chartered Institute of Journalists, 2020). Indeed, the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic undoubtedly illustrated that education is already among the aspects of life that has undergone dramatic changes with the aforementioned school closures and transition to remote learning affecting the highest number of students worldwide in history (United Nations, 2020a, p. 2). The sudden societal changes caused by the COVID-19 pandemic have resulted in a situation where far-reaching societal changes and developments are observed across the globe and yet they are still highly understudied with a scarce amount of scientific research present. In a specific way, this paper is highly inspired by the need to shed a light on the new societal developments as well as challenges and contribute to the existing knowledge in the field of education during the pandemic.
6. Social and developmental problem. This study places a great emphasis on the social problem of inequality in the context of the school leavers' access to education and their ability to prepare for the Matura examinations during the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, education undoubtedly plays a significant role in development processes as it is seen as a foundational element of sustainable (economic) development and progress (Ozturk, 2001, p. 8); a prerequisite for an upward socioeconomic mobility and personal growth (United Nations, n.d.; European Commission, n.d.); and a source of innovations as

well as scientific research (European Commission, n.d.). Bearing in mind the great importance of education and a need for an equal access to it, this paper attempts to not only to describe the current state of affairs in the context of school-leavers' challenges and identify the predominant problems experienced due to the closure of educational institutions, but also has as one of its motives an attempt to at least partially solve the existent problem from a prescriptive point of view by offering a concrete initiative that could be applied on a wider scope.



## 7 Theoretical framework

As indicated previously, this thesis is predominantly concerned with an issue of a possible uneven distribution of the school-leavers' access to education during the period of the COVID-19 pandemic and a subsequent lockdown of schools. Successful graduation from the upper secondary education determines whether the school-leavers qualify for the higher education in Lithuania and this paper, from a normative point of view, seeks to shed a light on the ways in which the students from different socioeconomic backgrounds in the city of Siauliai are possibly faced with unequal opportunities to prepare for the final Matura examinations. As a consequence, a decision was made to choose the theory of (in)equality of opportunity as the theoretical framework guiding the research.

The following part of the paper is structured as follows: in the first part, a more general overview of the theory of (in)equality of opportunity is presented; the second part elucidates the application of the theory in the field of education; the third sub-part illustrates the relevance of the selected theory to this research.

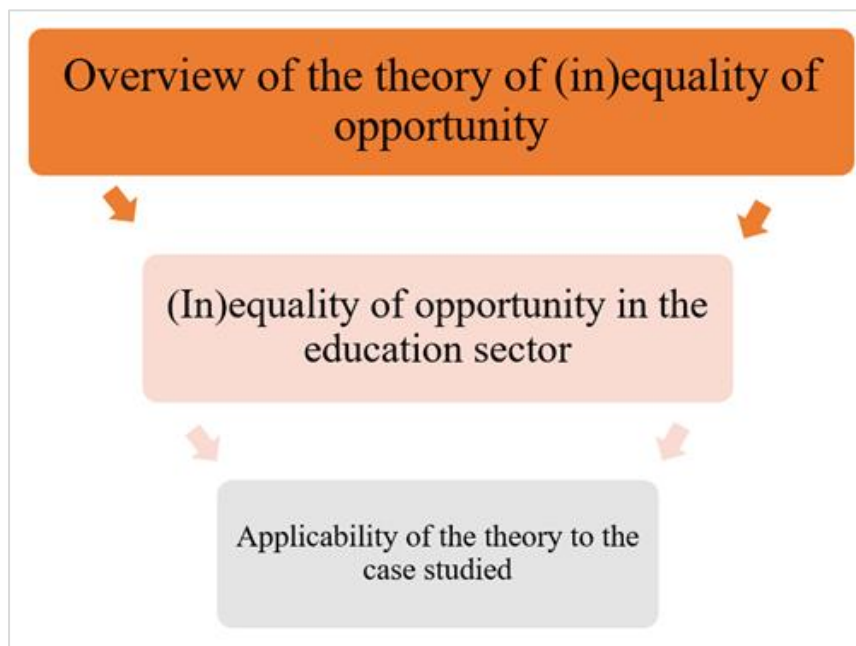


Figure 3. The funnel model for the theoretical framework of the thesis.

## 7.1 Theory of (in)equality of opportunity

It is important to note that the formulation '(in)equality of opportunity' is chosen intentionally since both inequality and equality of opportunity are commonly addressed in the greatest amount of the writings on this subject.

The emergence of the concept of (in)equality of opportunity in the literature on social justice is strongly associated with the writings of a political philosopher John Rawls in the early 1970s (Ferreira et al., 2015, p. 2; Palomino et al., 2018, p. 1046; Roemer, 2000, p. 30). Rawls was a strong critic of at-the-time prevailing welfarist paradigm that was predominantly concerned with individual achievements and their aggregation as the main criteria for the equity assessment of societies (Ferreira et al. 2015, p. 3). Rawls together with other scholars that followed him and were greatly inspired by his theory of justice, such as Ronald Dworkin and Amartya Sen (both in the early 1980s) held that it is not the individual achievements that should be seen as, in the words of Cohen (1989), “currency of egalitarian justice” but rather every individual’s equal opportunity to accomplish the desired achievements (Ferreira, 2015, p. 5). A fair society, therefore, is not necessarily the one in which everyone is equally well-off, satisfied or educated, but where even chances to succeed in achieving the wished-for outcomes is secured (ibid.).

At the centre of the theory of the (in)equality of opportunity, lies the notion that inequality which results from individual characteristics such as gender, race, socioeconomic factors or place of birth, i.e. the 'circumstances' over which one has no control, is unfair and these characteristics should not have any impact on the outcome, be it one’s health security, income, educational attainment or affluence (Palomino et al., 2018, p. 1046; Roemer, 2000, p. 5). Social fairness, according to this theory, assumes compensation for these characteristics and equalization of the opportunities of the individuals (Ferreira, 2015, p. 5; Roemer, 2000, p. 1). The theory of (in)equality of opportunity has gained prominence since its inception in 1970s and 1980s and is now regarded as the dominant concept of social justice in present-day Western countries (Ferreira, 2015, p. 2), suitable to analyse various spheres of human life from production and health to unemployment insurance and education (Roemer, 2000). The following part sheds a light on how the ideas and assumptions of the theory of (in)equality of opportunity translate into the field of education.

## 7.2 (In)equality of opportunity and education. Applicability of the theory to the case studied

(In)equalities of opportunity are present in the educational sector in multiple forms.

Educational attainment is highly influenced by the circumstances in childhood that one has no ability to change or control, for instance, the parental background, which has been shown to play a major role (Gamboa & Waltenberg, 2012). Additionally, apart from home environment and family circumstances, quality of the schooling itself significantly contributes to the inequality of the educational outcomes – this factor also lies outside one's abilities to be controlled (Anand et al, 2018, p. 1). Indeed, quality of schooling can be influenced by insufficient equipment (lack of schoolbooks, internet etc.) at the educational institutions or teachers' occasional inability to come to the schools at all (Glewwe & Muralidharan, 2016 in *ibid.*). Another factor that has a role in the inequality of the opportunity to acquire quality education is the ability of the richer families to select 'better' schools because of their social contacts and greater resources (*ibid.*). From a normative point of view of the theory, societies should invest the resources in education so the aforementioned factors that cause inequalities in education would cease to have any importance, meaning that all students who take identical effort in their education, arrive at the same outcome (Roemer, 2000, p. 60).

Theory of (in)equalities of opportunity in the education sector is central to the research presented in this thesis. The main aim of this paper is to identify whether the students from different socioeconomic backgrounds and family environments (i.e. the circumstances that students themselves are not capable of changing) in the city of Siauliai, Lithuania, face uneven opportunities to acquire quality upper secondary education during the COVID-19 crisis. Since inequality that derives from the circumstances which are out of the individual control is unacceptable, this theory will assist in indicating the societal fairness in the context of the research. Application of this theory to the case studied is also critical from the development perspective, since education (and, consequently, its attainment) is also considered to be the key element of not only the social justice but also the economic production and efficiency (Becker, 1964; Lucas 1988 in Palomino et al., 2018, p. 1047; Anand et al., 2018, p. 1).

Following part of this paper reviews the literature on the (in)equality of opportunity in the education sector and is built on a further study of the readings presented in the theoretical framework. Some of the readings (e.g. Roemer, 2000) are used and analysed in both theoretical framework and the literature review as they address both theoretical and empirical components of the research of (in)equality of opportunity.

## 8 Literature review

The structure of this literature review follows a similar funnel method employed in the construction of the theoretical framework. Firstly, it reviews two books, namely *Equality of Opportunity* written by John E. Roemer in 2000 and *Early Childhood Care and Education and Equality of Opportunity Theoretical and Empirical Perspectives on Social Challenges* written by Kaspar Burger in 2012. The two books set the foundation for the greater overall understanding of the subject in question and present different methods of studying the inequality of opportunity as well as theoretical assumptions of this theory. Secondly, the literature review sheds a light on the empirical cases executed in the field of inequality of opportunity in the education sector in order to illustrate the practical application of the theory in a 'real-life'. Finally, the literature review elucidates the existing gaps in the existing knowledge and the ways in which this master thesis attempts to 'fill' these gaps.

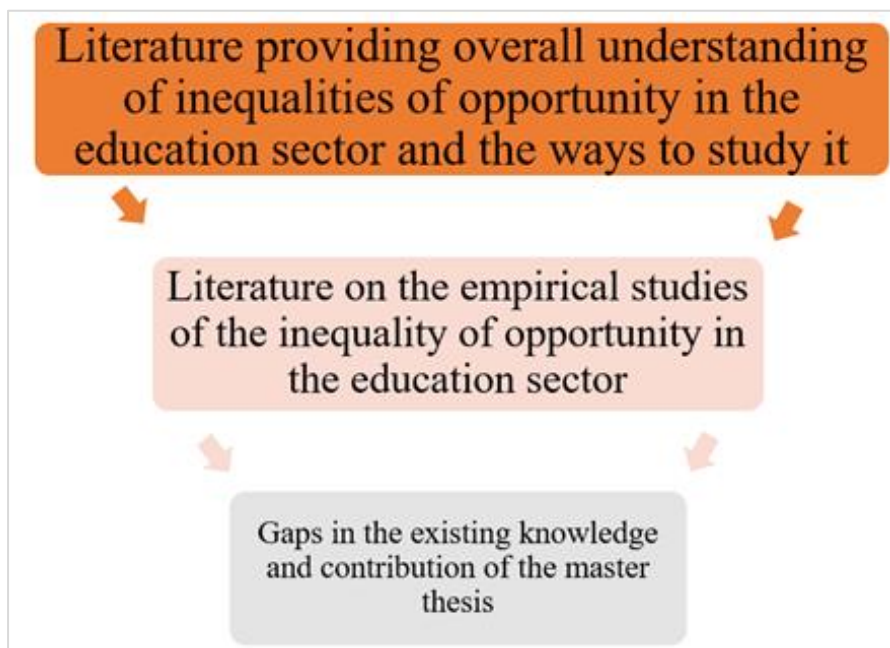


Figure 4. The funnel model for the literature review of the thesis

The books written by Roemer and Burger both focus on some of the foundational ideas of the theory of (in)equality of opportunity and complement each other. Indeed, Roemer in his previous writings in 1993 advocated for equality of opportunity by using his famous metaphor of 'levelling the playing field' (Roemer in Ferreira et al., 2015, p. 9) and this metaphor is not only present in his book from 2000, but is also used extensively by Burger in his work that was published almost two decades later, indicating the ideological consistency and

continuation of the theory throughout the years. Both scholars also follow the normative tradition of the theory of (in)equality of opportunity and present their advice (even on how to raise children!) and policy prescriptions that would assist in achieving fairness in societies. As mentioned previously, Roemer insists that the investments in education should be allocated in a manner that would ensure that all students achieve an outcome proportional to their efforts (Roemer, 2000, p. 60). In a similar manner, Burger points to the differences between meritocratic societies and the cast societies, where the former is defined by the access of goods and achievements based on birth, and the latter sees achievements as a subject to competition in which all individuals have equal opportunities (Burger, 2012, p. 18). In order to achieve societal meritocracy, Burger holds, governmental intervention is needed in the services of early childhood, and he points to the investments made by the countries that address social inequality among pupils during the first years of their 'school career' (ibid.). Additionally, Burger goes even further and adds a part in his book called *What should parents know?* where he implicitly advises parents to stimulate the education of their children by creating diverse learning opportunities 'appropriate' intellectual experiences contribute to their successful development (ibid., p. 191).

Writings of Burger and Roemer are also particularly rich in their methodological presentation of the assessment of (in)equality of opportunity. Roemer is seemingly a proponent of quantitative methods and calculations of (in)equalities of opportunity as he uses mathematical functions (Roemer, 2000, pp. 56-60) while Burger employs mixed methods in his studies that vary from statistical analysis to comparative-historical methods (Burger, 2012, p. 20). For instance, in his study on the existing and rather contrasting attitudes on childcare in France and the United States, Burger compares the differing historical course taken by the childcare institutions of the respective countries and concludes that the historical causes are connected to the prevailing divergent perceptions (ibid., p. 151).

Further elaboration on the ways that the inequality of opportunity has been studied by the scholars in this field is presented in the following part which puts emphasis on the empirical studies.

## 8.1 Empirical studies of (in)equalities of opportunity and existing gap in the knowledge

In order to acquire a sufficient grasp of the ways that the (in)equality of the opportunity has been studied, a variety of texts have been selected, illuminating differing methods employed in different parts of the globe, namely Africa, Europe and OECD countries.

Majority of the studies found use quantitative methods of measurement. For instance, Palomino et al. (2018) in their study on inequality of opportunity use the data from European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) and include a set of circumstances over which one possesses no control, namely level of parental education, father's occupation (statistics on mother's occupation was not available), gender, and the perceived (financial) struggles experienced by the respondent when he or she was around 14 years old (p. 1048). Palomino et al. also collected the data of the respondent's current income, educational attainment and occupation. Building upon one of the central ideas of the theory of (in)equality of opportunity, Palomino et al. held that equality is achieved in the cases where an individual's income is not dependent on his or her circumstances. However, the findings of the study were far from achieving this ideal of equality, and showed that in countries like Portugal and Luxembourg, inequality of opportunity in educational attainment constitutes over 30% of the total inequality of opportunity (ibid.). The study also suggests that individuals in the countries which invest a bigger share of their GDP in education experience lower connections between circumstances, educational attainment and adult income (ibid.).

On the contrary, Raitano et al. conducted a study on the inequality of opportunity by focusing exclusively on 15-year-old students, rather than adults, by placing the emphasis on both nation and school policies as well as the effect of the family background in the OECD countries. The study found that heterogeneous classes contribute to the equalization of the achievements of the students from different backgrounds since lower-ability students are likely to benefit from working with higher-ability students. Consequently, countries should ideally avoid policies targeted towards homogenization of classes since they tend to reinforce existing differences (p. 3150). In an extensive list of variables, national policies on terms of pre-primary school and even the number of books at students' homes were considered (ibid., p. 3152).

A great deal of statistical data was also utilized by Anand et al. (2018) who analysed the data on over 1,000,000 children in three countries in East Africa, namely Kenya, mainland Tanzania and Uganda. The data was collected by the Uwezo initiative and contained information from the surveys conducted with the school-aged children. Surveys included information on individual household characteristics and resident children (age, gender, attendance of school etc.) (Anand et al., 2018, pp. 9-10). After the surveys were completed, children were given tests on literacy and numeracy. This large-scale analysis showed that household circumstances play an important, but not the greatest, role in the inequality of opportunity in education. Indeed, assortative matching (richer households tend to match with schools of higher quality) and quality of the schools themselves, together account for an even greater share of inequality in educational opportunity. Consequently, a school reform that would improve the distribution of quality of education is strongly needed (ibid., p. 24).

There are two main lessons from the literature review to be taken into further consideration. Firstly, it is a commonplace to study (in)equality of opportunity by employing quantitative methods and using statistical data. As the studies by Palomino et al. and Raitano et al. indicated, rich statistical resources are available on the students' wellbeing and the factors that they have no control over (circumstances) in both the OECD and the European Union countries.

Secondly, the scholarly work in the subject of (in)equality of opportunity tends to be normative and entails advice as well as (policy) prescriptions. As was illustrated in the literature review, the normative nature of the writings of the proponents of this theory has been prevailing for decades. Such scholarly tradition is of central importance the execution of this master thesis as the last part of it entail specific measures that have been put in place as a result of the findings of this thesis.

However, as the two aforementioned findings are likely to be suitable for the guidance of this research, they also indicate the existing gaps in the literature that this paper aims to fill. Firstly, with a predominant focus on quantitative measures, qualitative dimensions have become somewhat 'forgotten'. By conducting semi-structured interviews and carrying out thematic qualitative content analysis (Chapter Thematic qualitative content analysis), this paper is expected to enrich the existing knowledge on the possibly emerged (in)equalities of



educational opportunities during the COVID-19 pandemic in the city of Siauliai by also contributing to the expansion of methodological scope that could be employed in the studies of such empirical cases. In a similar manner, while scholars agree that there are substantial variations in (in)equality of opportunity within countries (e.g. Anand et al. 2018, p. 22), most of the writings focus on the national or even international levels of inequality of opportunity. By presenting a small-scale case study of a single city in Lithuania and recalling the normative nature of the theory, this paper may not only allow for identification of localised concerns, but also for localised (policy) initiatives and interventions (Chaper Initiative) Finally, the academic literature on (in)equality of educational opportunities in relation to the COVID-19 is barely existent and this master thesis attempts to contribute to the scarce knowledge in this specific field.

## 9 Research design and methodology

Following part of the paper presents the research design selected for the studied phenomenon and illustrates the methodology employed in order to answer the research question.

### 9.1 Research design: case study

Research design should be conceived as an indicator of the research type that a scholar decides to carry out (Byrne, 2017) and a plan illustrating the way in which the research questions will be answered within the available period of time (Ragin, 1994, p. 191 in Flick, 2014, p. 122).

This paper employs a case study as a research design. In academic scholarship, the term ‘case’ is understood relatively broadly in this context - selection of subjects of analysis of this type of research design varies from the studies of communities and social classes to organizations and families (Flick, 2014, p. 122). As added by Bryman (2016, p. 67), case studies are also commonly associated with specific locations. In this paper both the subject of analysis and the location of the research area are stated clearly as the subject of analysis is the school-leavers’ class of 2021 and the complexities regarding their access to education during the COVID-19-related school closures, while the location of the research area is the city of Siauliai, Lithuania.

As a research design, and as the name suggests, case studies revolve around thorough as well as in-depth analyses of single cases with the goal of shedding a light on their distinctive features (Bryman, 2012, pp. 66, 69; Lund, 2014, p. 224). In relation to the study of this paper, a decision to employ case study as a research design was made for a multitude of reasons. Firstly, case studies are particularly favourable when the goal of a scholar is to analyse a present-day phenomenon which takes place in a real-life context (Yin, 2002, p. 1). As previously mentioned, temporally this study was conducted during the last semester of the school-leavers’ class of 2021 and was finalized halfway through the Matura examinations session; and the contextual (‘real-life’) background of the study is presented in the following parts of the paper (“geographic study area and context”). Secondly, selection of case study as a research design is also highly related to scholar’s relationship with the subjects of analysis and the formulation of the research questions since case studies serve as a convenient research

design when ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions are posed for their explanatory as well as descriptive nature; and when a researcher conducting a case study has no control over the phenomena that he or she attempts to study (ibid.). In the context of this study, ‘how’ question is central in order to illustrate possible forms of inequality that the school-leavers face during the COVID-19 closure of educational institutions. The role that I as a researcher have in relation to the studied phenomenon is also highly limited: it goes without saying, that, during the course of study, I did not have any impact and could not manipulate the spread of the virus and the emergence of the global pandemic in the first place. Additionally, despite serving as the advisor to the mayor, decisions regarding the closure of educational institutions during the pandemic were primarily made at national rather than municipal level by the state Emergency Commission, and, as a consequence, municipalities had minor impact regarding school closures during the period of execution of this study. Finally, an additional motivational factor for the decision to select case study as a research design was a great role that the theory of (in)equality of opportunity plays in this research. As was noted previously (“Research strategy”), initial interest in the subject of this research was stimulated by an increased acquaintance with the literature on the theory of (in)equality of opportunity and the ideas of ‘levelling the playing field’; necessity to ensure individuals’ even chances of achieving their desired outcomes; and compensation for the external socioeconomic factors that one has no control over. Notions of the theory of (in)equality of opportunity guided the research in regards to the formulation of the research question (by aiming to shed a light on the different challenges experienced by the school-leavers due to the socioeconomic factors that they are not able to influence); design of the questions for the interviews (with an attempt to indicate the forms of possible inequality for the school-leavers from different socioeconomic backgrounds to successfully prepare for the Matura examinations); and the prescriptive dimension of this paper (the study follows normative approach of the (in)equality of opportunity theorists by suggesting possible measures to at least partially address the possible inequalities). The great weight that the theory carries in this paper indicates that the study relies extensively on theoretical assumptions, normative values and concepts of a specific theory while other theoretical considerations are set aside (Levy, 2008, p. 4). Case studies as a research design are particularly relevant when emphasis is placed on strong theoretical foundations and in the context of this paper, this study classifies as a theory-guided idiographic case study (ibid.) with a central role played by theory of (in)equality of opportunity and an aim to describe and interpret a phenomena that is bound in terms of space

and time without a goal of constructing far-reaching generalizations (Yin, 2009, p. 10; Levy, 2008 pp. 4, 6). Supplemented by the typology of case studies presented by Yin (2009 in Bryman, 2016, p. 70), this paper also presents a critical case where the focus is placed on the selected theory and the phenomenon is studied in relation to the theoretical assumptions, concepts and hypotheses that provide a more detailed examination and understanding of the subject of analysis.

In attempts to illustrate the aforementioned distinctive features of a studied phenomenon, it is a commonplace for the proponents of the case study research design to employ open, case-relevant and predominantly, but not exclusively, qualitative approaches in terms of the selection of methods (Flick, 2014, p. 123; Bryman, 2012, pp. 68, 76; Yin, 2009, p. 10; Lund, 2014; Levy, 2008) with ethnographies, participant observations and interviewing being among the most prevalent. The latter methods are seen as suitable tools for the execution of a thorough and instructive analysis of a selected case of study (Bryman, 2012, p. 68; Flick, 2014, p. 123). As a consequence, following the case study as a research design of this the paper, semi-structured interviews and qualitative content analysis were carried out in order to answer the research questions and are presented below.

## 9.2 Semi-structured interviews

To put it in an arguably overly simplistic manner, interviews can be conceived as “a method of data collection in which one person (an interviewer) asks questions of another person (a respondent): interviews are conducted either face to face or by telephone.” (Polit & Beck, 2006 in Whiting, 2007, p. 35) or as a “managed verbal exchange” (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003 and Gillham, 2000 in Newton, 2010, p. 1). However, when methodological considerations of employment of this particular method of data collection begin, a more detailed elaboration is necessary.

First of all, interviews are generally classified into three main categories: structured interviews, semi-structured and unstructured interviews (May, 2001 in O’Reilly, 2012, p. 119; Newton, 2010, p. 1; Burns & Grove, 2005, Fontana & Frey, 2005, Polit & Beck, 2006 all in Whiting, 2007, p. 35; Bryman, 2012, p. 471) with every interview falling into some place between the poles of ‘structured’ and unstructured’ (Newton, 2010, p. 1). Structured interviews are commonly associated with quantitative research and are characterized by

closed questions (Newton, 2010, p. 1; Whiting, 2007, p. 35); highly specific set of standardized and predetermined questions that have to be strictly followed while addition of extra questions during the process of interviewing is vastly unrecommended; and inflexibility (Bryman, 2012, p. 470; O'Reilly, 2012, p. 120). It is a commonplace for the proponents of structured interview to employ a questionnaire and survey formats (Newton, 2010, p. 1; Whiting, 2007, p. 35; O'Reilly, 2012, p. 120). On the opposite side of this continuum are the unstructured interviews that are described by Bryman (2012, p. 471) as "almost totally unstructured". These types of interviews are conceived as a conversation rather than an actual interview (O'Reilly, 2012, p. 120; Burgess, 1984 in Bryman, 2012, p. 471) with high levels of flexibility and informality; free flowing; and open-ended questions being some of their defining elements (ibid.). Unstructured interviews are particularly popular among ethnographers conducting observations (Bryman, 2012, p. 471; O'Reilly, 2012, p. 118). The study of this paper, however, revolves around the type of interviews that is located somewhere in the middle of the aforementioned continuum but still leans more closely towards qualitative methods of research (Flick, 2014, p. 197; Bryman, 2012, p. 471), namely semi-structured interviews. It is important to note that semi-structured interviews utilize elements from both structured and unstructured interviews (O'Reilly, 2012, p. 120) as they include both a relatively specific set of questions in a form of an interview guide based on a concrete topic, while at the same time provide the interviewer with the flexibility to supplement the interview with additional topics if they emerge during the process of interviewing (Flick, 2014, pp. 197, 211; Bryman, 2012, p. 471). Additionally, semi-structured interviews are characterized by a focus on rich, deep and detailed rather than 'yes or no' answers (Flick, 2014, p. 208; Bryman, 2012, p. 470; DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006 in Whiting, 2007, p. 36) Since this study of this paper primarily focuses on the perspectives of the tutors of school-leavers' classes and seeks to shed a light on possible inequalities that have resulted due to the COVID-19 pandemic, semi-structured interviews are particularly suitable in this context for their emphasis on a comparatively clearly defined topic with a simultaneous availability of inclusion of newly discovered topics during the process of interviewing.

## 9.2.1 Selection of respondents for the interviews

### 9.2.1.1 Purposive sampling and selection of the sample for the study

In contrast to the quantitative research and its inclination towards probability (or random) sampling, where essentially every member of the studied population has the same probability of becoming a member of the selected sample; the qualitative research centres around the conception of purposive sampling, where, in the context of a semi-structured interviews, the emphasis is placed on the specific characteristics of the respondents that are relevant for their inclusion in the sample in relation to the research questions aimed to answer (Flick, 2014, p. 208; Bryman, 2012, p. 471). Complementing the selection of the case study as a research design, purposive sampling also does not seek to draw far-reaching populational generalizations, and rather revolves around a goal of providing the study with the highest number of detailed and in-depth perspectives of the case studied that possible to acquire bearing in mind the limitations of the available time (Bryman, 2012, pp. 416, 418). When a decision is made to adopt the purposive sample, it is important to set out the criteria in accordance with which the respondents for the interviews are selected. One could reasonably argue that an optimal sample in the context of this specific study could or even should have been the school-leavers themselves. However, it is necessary to recall the context in which this study was carried out. Firstly, it was not possible to arrange face-to-face meetings or interviews with the school-leavers due to a severe epidemiological situation in the city of Siauliai at the time of writing of the thesis, and, as a consequence, meetings, conversations and interviews were executed exclusively using online and remote tools of communication (in this case, ZOOM calls). Selection of the school-leavers as a sample and execution of interviews online in this context would have likely undermined the entire purpose of the study, since there is a high probability that the students from socioeconomically more vulnerable families would have been underrepresented due to a relatively higher likelihood of this group not having technological means (computers, internet connection etc.); material environment (a quiet room at home where an online interview could take place) or being exposed to other factors that could have influenced their misrepresentation in relation to the school-leavers from families that are comparatively better off socioeconomically.

A decision was therefore made to shift the focus from the school-leavers to their tutors and the education experts from the Department of Education in the Siauliai city municipality who

had been working extensively with both the school-leavers and their parents and had had a substantial working experience at the time that the interviews took place.

In an attempt to answer the research and sub-questions, semi-structured in-depth interviews with 10 tutors of the school-leavers' classes from each of the 10 upper secondary education institutions, and 2 experts from the Siauliai municipality Department of education were conducted. The main criteria for the selection of the respondents, was their working experience: only the tutors and experts that had been working both before and during the pandemic were interviewed in order to illuminate the main changes caused by the COVID-19 in the context of the challenges of the transition to the remote means of learning. Combination of interviews with the tutors and interviews with the education experts serves as way of using triangulation in analysing data on the level of the data sets (Flick, 2014, p. 189), as the results will present the similarities and differences of the identified themes and patterns of the perspectives of both the tutors and the experts (Figure 5).

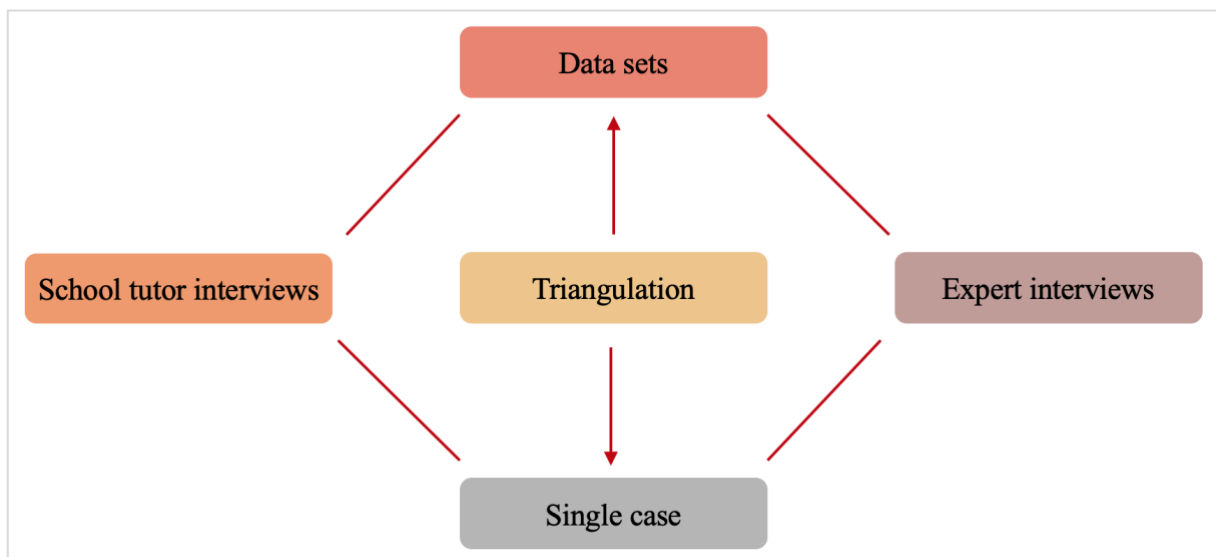


Figure 5. Levels of Triangulation with two forms of qualitative data.

## 9.2.2 Ethical considerations

### 9.2.2.1 Overview of ethical issues

It goes without saying, that one of the key objectives of the master thesis is to achieve a great level of not only academic, but also ethical and moral value (Flick, 2014, p. 49; Bryman, 2012, p. 129). In an attempt to address the ethical issues that have emerged throughout the process of the production of this study, a commitment and obligation to fully follow and comply with the *General Guidelines for Research Ethics* (The Norwegian National Research

Ethics Committees (Etikkom), 2016); guidelines provided by the NSD (Norwegian Centre for Research Data) (NSD, n.d.); and the *Code of practice for processing personal data in research and students' dissertations* set out by the university of Agder (University of Agder, n.d.), is taken into a close consideration.

This part of the paper will more closely elaborate on the COVID-19 risks and a necessity to avoid (physical) harm of both the author of the thesis and the participants of the study – for now it is sufficient to state that the strategy employed for the organization of the thesis-related work has been constructed in a manner that prevents any physical contact with the subjects of the study and exclusively utilizes remote and online tools for communication, data gathering and collection, execution of the interviews etc.

As this master thesis assumes execution of multiple (12) semi-structured interviews with the tutors of the classes of the school-leavers and municipal education experts/teachers, I also committed to treat the interviewees with respect, confidentiality and dignity as well as work on the basis on fully informed and completely free consent. In addition to that, significant attention has been paid to the duty to inform, i.e. the provision of adequate information to the participants about the field, objective, results and the usage of the research and its results.

Assessment of ethical issues also relates to personal position of a researcher and his or her commitment to the achievement of appropriate scientific conduct. Consequently, I have reported any possible conflicts of interest (for instance, if one of the interviews conducted is with a tutor who tutored me in the past). Additionally, scientific integrity has also been ensured by putting an emphasis on avoidance of plagiarism; compliance with good citation practices; data sharing (simultaneously keeping the balance and ensuring privacy as well as confidentiality) (Etikkom, 2019); and quality (designing research questions of high relevance, implementing suitable methodology etc.) (Etikkom, 2016).

At the same time, the public bodies (in the case of this master thesis, upper secondary education institutions and municipal Department of Education) have been expected to follow the guidelines of research ethics and make themselves both available and accessible (Etikkom, 2019), since the general public has a valid interest in how such institutions operate in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.



### 9.2.2.2 Risks for participants

As mentioned previously, the major risks for the participants have been highly related to the COVID-19 pandemic and they are presented below. Apart from that, however, the primary concern has been to ensure that participants do not experience any mental strains (Etikkom, 2019) and feel entirely comfortable taking a part in my study. This is particularly relevant when one bears in mind the fact that inequality among students in its various forms is witnessed by the teachers as well as education experts, and it is a relatively sensitive topic to discuss and shed a light on. As a consequence, I have committed to make certain the free will of the participants to enter or withdraw from the interview at any time; to decide whether the data collected can be used for the study or should be deleted and not made the use of. It has also been my obligation to ensure that the participants do not subsequently experience any unwanted exposure and interference while their privacy is fully respected.

### 9.2.2.3 Covid-19 risk assessment for participants

As mentioned before, this master thesis employed the tools that allowed to both maintain the physical distance between the participants of the study and me; and do not undermine the process of an appropriate scientific conduct. I did not need to physically travel between different places to meet the participants of the study and there were no objective reasons for me to ask to meet the participants in person, since interviews, transcripts and analysis were easily carried out without in-person conversations. Consequently, this study has by no means contributed to the risk of the participants of the study to potentially catch the COVID-19.

### 9.2.2.4 Informed consent

Despite the fact that ethical guidelines and legislation highly differ from one another, some overlaps exist among the two. While ethical norms serve predominantly advisory as well as guiding role and legislation can be regarded as “prescriptions and prohibitions” (Etikkom, 2019), they both agree that informed consent is a necessary precondition if one is to collect personal data (Etikkom, 2019; NSD, n.d.). Informing people whose personal data one is planning to collect and process is a fundamental right, established in the Norwegian law (NSD, n.d.).

Generally, informed consent in the context of this study means a permission granted by the participants of the study to collect their personal data in their full knowledge of the nature of their participation and possible consequences of their involvement in the research process. Consent from the participant of this study was voluntary and explicit (University of Agder, n.d.), and was received in a written form bearing in mind the regulation that obliges me to be able to provide the documentation or demonstration of the information sent to and received by the potential participants and their subsequent consent (ibid.).

#### 9.2.2.5 Personal data protection

Firstly, it is important to note that even though the data collected for this research was fully anonymized in the process, I was obliged to notify the NSD since this obligation relates to the original data collected (University of Agder, n.d.).

In this master thesis I have collected the following personal data: names of the participants (school teachers and assistants to the principals for education); their phone numbers; e-mail addresses; sound recordings of people; background data that can identify a person (workplace and position in the workplace). Since exclusively online and remote tools were employed (ZOOM calls) in the process of data collection, I have also been committed to only using the recording devices that do not have internet connection and transferring the subsequent recordings to OneDrive of the University of Agder as soon as possible (University of Agder, n.d.). Once the data had been collected, the questions of its storage the storage of data and anonymization became central.

As already mentioned, any data that had held personal information, was transferred and saved on UiA's servers that are protected with passwords. In a similar manner, the computer that has been used to access those servers was also password-protected and user-limited. Any physical material, for instance, digital audio recorders, were placed into a locked cupboard located in a locked room. As already mentioned, in order to fully comply with the Personal Data Act section 5, any personal data will be deleted once this research project is completed (UiA, n.d.).

In the processing phase, any personal data was anonymized, meaning that all directly identifiable data (names, e-mail addresses etc.) were deleted, and any indirectly identifiable

data (workplace or position in the workplace) was either deleted or rewritten in a way that made it impossible to become recognized (NSD, n.d.).

Finally, building upon a decision to use the template for the information letter provided by the NSD, the following rights of the participants have been ensured throughout the process of the master thesis production in order to fully comply with the guidelines and regulations of the personal data protection:

1. Participants have a full access to their personal data that has been collected and processed. If a necessity to send the participants their personal data emerges, the documents will be encrypted to prevent an unauthorized access (UiA, n.d.);
2. Participants are free to request erasure of their personal data at any time of the research process;
3. Participants are free to request correction of personal data in case the data collected is incorrect (NSD, n.d.).

### 9.3 Thematic qualitative content analysis

As a tool for the analysis of the interviews conducted, one of the most commonly used qualitative analysis approaches, namely thematic qualitative content analysis was employed in this study. At the centre of this method lays the objective to search for, identify, analyse, and report the central underlying themes and patterns in the data analysed as well as illustrate different perspectives on the specific selected topic (Braun & Clarke in Flick, 2014, p. 421; Bryman, 2012, p. 557; White & Marsh, 2006, pp. 28, 34). This method of analysis is particularly well suited for the operationalized research design of this paper and semi-structured interviews as it entails: the openness and flexibility in the form of inclusion of the newly emerged and unanticipated themes during the process of interviewing into analysis and coding (White & Marsh, 2006, p. 35); emphasis on the purposive sampling in the attempts to answer the research questions (ibid.); and importance of the theoretical framework and concepts in the process of searching for the themes in the collected data (Bryman, 2012, p. 580).

From a practical point of view, scholars suggest similar guidelines to follow when conducting the thematic qualitative content analysis. The first step entails selection of data that provides answers to the posed research questions (United States General Accounting Office, 1989, p.

8; White & Marsh, 2006, p. 27), and familiarization with that data (Braun & Clarke, 2006 in Flick, 2014, p. 421). As already mentioned and argued for in the previous section of this chapter, a decision was made to interview the tutors of the school-leavers and the experts from the Siauliai city municipality Department of Education in order to shed a light on the possibly emerging forms of inequality of opportunity among the school-leavers due to the closure of educational institutions during the COVID-19 pandemic. After the interviews had been conducted, transcription of the collected data followed. The total volume of the twelve transcripts constituted 17, 266 words organized into 41 pages of data with around 23 hours spent transcribing the interviews. Subsequently, the transcripts were read several times in order to reach a substantial level of familiarization as suggested by Flick (2014, p. 422) and Bryman (2012, p. 578)

The second step entailed generation of initial codes and their organization into emerging themes (Flick, 2014, p. 422; White & Marsh, 2006, p. 37; United States General Accounting Office, 1989, p. 8). The primary focus here is given to the research question as well as the sub-questions and the theoretical framework of the study as the source for the establishment of the initial codes (White & Marsh, 2006, p. 37). As a consequence, the initial three main codes (or categories) derived from the three sub questions are as follows: 1. Code (category) ‘the main challenges that the school-leavers from socially disadvantaged families face due to the closure of educational institutions and transition to remote learning’; 2. Code (category) ‘the main challenges that the school-leavers from socioeconomically better-off families face due to the closure of educational institutions and transition to remote learning’; 3. Code (category) ‘the main differences between the two’. As a result, in the execution of the second step, the transcripts were read with an emphasis placed on the central topics relevant to the finding the answers to the research questions (Flick, 2014, p. 424).

The third step deals with the reviewing, defining and refining of the initial ‘broad’ themes with their division into subthemes, and separation from the irrelevant ones (Bryman, 2012, p. 579; Flick, 2014, p. 422). Once again, the subthemes also derive in relation to the research questions, theoretical framework and, as previously mentioned, it is possible that some new themes would emerge during the process of analysis of the data. The subthemes of this study will be presented in the *Analysis* chapter.

The final step in the execution of the thematic qualitative content analysis is the presentation of the of the results of the analysis. It is commonplace to include visual methods of

representation (for instance, diagrams, matrixes, tables, figures etc.) in the presentation phase of the analysis (Flick, 2014, p. 422; Bryman, 2012, p. 579; White & Marsh, 2006, p. 36). This study employs the method of presentation suggested by White & Marsh (2006, p. 36) and presents the findings in the percentage values regarding the frequency and the importance attached to the specific themes by the interviewees. Additionally, the indicated values are analysed and interpreted in the context of the subject of analysis (Chapter Geographic study area and context for the thesis) and theoretical framework of the study (Chapter Theoretical framework) in order to provide the so-called 'bigger picture' of the studied subject (ibid.). This chapter has presented the research design of this paper and illustrated the reasoning being employment of the case study as an approach. Additionally, it has presented the argumentation for the execution of semi-structured interviews and selection of thematic qualitative content analysis as the analytical tool and a method to analyse the collected data. The next chapter is concerned with the analysis of the data and presentation of the findings.

## 10 Analysis

### 10.1 General information on the respondents

The first part of the analysis addresses the general information about the participants of the interviews (tutors of school-leavers' classes and the experts from the Siauliai city municipality Department of Education) and therefore deals with the first set of questions from the interview guide ('Appendices'). Provision of more general information on the respondents not only provides the analysis with a more specific structure (O'Reilly, 2012, p. 121), but also illustrates the working experience of the tutors as well as the experts; the relationship that the tutors have with the school-leavers as well as their parents; and the perceived level of trust that the tutors have in relation to the school-leavers and their parents. The findings of the data analysis in regard to the general information on the respondents are presented below (Figure 1). It is important to note that during the analysis of the data respondents are quoted or referred to in anonymised forms (School-leavers' tutor (Tutor) from 1 to 10, and the expert from the municipal Department of Education (Education Expert) from 1 to 2). Additionally, the following part of the analysis only indicates the working experience of the experts that participated in the interviews as they do not work directly with the school-leavers or their parents, and therefore no data on their relationship with the two groups is provided.

As the findings in the figure below indicate, all of the tutors and experts interviewed had the required experience indicated in the criteria for the selection of the respondents. Indeed 100% of the respondents had been holding their respective positions as tutors or experts at least since the current school-leavers entered upper secondary education institutions in 2018 and were 9<sup>th</sup> graders at that time (at the time of writing, school-leavers are 12<sup>th</sup> graders in accordance to the Lithuanian educational system). The shortest indicated experience among the tutors was 4 years (school-leavers' tutor 3) and the longest experience was 38 years (school-leavers' tutor 5). In the case of the experts from the Siauliai city municipality Department of Education, both of them had been comparatively more experienced than some of the tutors, with 13 and 15.5 years of experience respectively (expert from the municipal Department of Education 1 and 2). It could therefore be argued that the participants of the interview had adequate experience in order to sufficiently grasp the problematique of the subject of analysis of this paper.

Table 1. General information on the respondents.

General information on the respondents	Tutors of the school-leavers' classes (percentage of all respondents in this category)	Experts from the Siauliai city municipality Department of education (percentage of all respondents of this category)
Work experience of at least 4 years or since the beginning of the pandemic	100%	100%
<b>Close relationship with the tutored school-leavers</b>	<b>90%</b>	<b>N/D</b>
High level of trust from the tutored school-leavers	90%	N/D
Hybrid (both formal and informal, depending on the suitability for a specific case in question) and frequent communication with the school-leavers	60%	N/D
Predominantly Informal and frequent communication with the school-leavers	30%	N/D
<b>Distant relationship with the tutored school-leavers</b>	<b>10%</b>	<b>N/D</b>
Predominantly formal and infrequent communication with the school-leavers	10%	N/D
Low level of trust from the tutored school-leavers	10%	N/D
<b>Close relationship with the school-leavers' parents</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>N/D</b>
Hybrid (both formal and informal, depending on the suitability for the specific case in question) and frequent communication with the school-leavers' parents	100%	N/D

Findings of general information also indicate that the majority of tutors of the school-leavers had a close relationship with the students and their parents characterized by both formal as well as informal and frequent instances of communication and high levels of trust. In all of the instances when the tutors reported close relationship with their students, a close relationship with their parents was also indicated, but the same did not apply to the cases of distant relationship. The indicated tutors' close relationship with the school-leavers and their parents is not that surprising, however, and it supports the broader tendencies in the country recently indicated by Lithuanian scholars. As the findings of Jusiene et al. (2021, p. 134, 135)

show, 73,1% of the teachers in Lithuania described their collaboration with parents as effective; 86,8% of the teachers confirmed that parents of the students have become more involved in the educational processes during the pandemic; and 61,2% of the teachers felt that the parental trust in the teachers has increased during the pandemic.

The exemplification of a close and informal relationship as well as hybrid communication between the school-leavers and the tutors was illustrated by the Tutor 1:

“I talk to my students at least once per week during the class meetings, but there are times when I chat with some of them four times a day and we even wish each other goodnight. <...> We discuss everything from the struggles that children in Zimbabwe face to interstellar wars, and sometimes we talk about personal issues with the students who then ask me not tell their moms about it afterwards.”

Other exemplary cases of close relationship were expressed in different forms: for instance, the class of school-leavers tutored by the Tutor 8 even managed to produce a theatrical play while rehearsing online with the premiere for the parents also performed via the ZOOM platform; and the Tutor 9 expressed the strengthened relationship with the parents of the students by stating that she/he was confident in saying that some of the parents had become her/his close friends during the pandemic.

However, an instance of a worsened relationship during the pandemic was also indicated as presented by Tutor 10:

“Since the beginning of the last semester in February, I would call my relationship with my class as formal. *They* (school leavers) started to hide away. During the class meetings I would only see two students with cameras turned on and there are 28 of *them*. Ever since I could not seem to find a way to approach them.”

The latter quote is particularly illustrative for the formal wording used by the Tutor 10 and the fact that the tutored school-leavers were formally and arguably distantly referred to as ‘they’ and ‘them’. However, the same tutor indicated that her/his contact with the parents of the school-leavers improved significantly.



Analysis of the general information on the participants of the interview indicated important elements for the further analysis of the main categories and themes. Firstly, it showed that all of the respondents had a substantial amount of experience and had been holding their respective positions as tutors or experts before and during the pandemic-related school closures. Secondly, the analysis illustrated and complemented the existent tendencies that the relationship between tutors and their students as well as their parents had generally strengthened during the pandemic, with one exception in the case of Tutor 10. It could therefore be argued that the tutors of the classes of school-leavers are in a position where they are capable of providing substantial information regarding the educational processes during the period of remote learning as well as possible emerging forms of inequality of opportunity that the school-leavers experience, since they had acquired a high level of trust and had been in a close relationship with both the school-leavers and their parents at the time the interviews were conducted.

## 10.2 Main themes of the analysis

As was indicated in the previous chapter, the initial three codes and themes derived from the research question and the sub-questions, and read as follows: 1. Code (category) ‘the main challenges that the school-leavers from socially disadvantaged families face due to the closure of educational institutions and transition to remote learning’; 2. Code (category) ‘the main challenges that the school-leavers from socioeconomically better-off families face due to the closure of educational institutions and transition to remote learning’; 3. Code (category) ‘the main differences between the two’. However, and as mentioned previously, in the execution of the thematic qualitative content analysis, the findings of the data are central in shaping the analysis and are capable of supplementing the main themes that initially derived from the research questions (White & Marsh, 2006, pp. 34, 38). Due to the inductive dimension of the thematic qualitative content analysis, it is possible that new, unanticipated themes would emerge as a result of a thorough analysis of the data, and the newly identified patterns would alter the direction of the research questions or the answers to them (ibid., pp. 34-35), and in the context of this study, the latter (identification of initially unanticipated findings) was the case.

The original formulation of the research question and the sub-questions was predominantly based on mutual exclusivity, meaning that the objective was to find the challenges

experienced primarily by the school-leavers that are from socioeconomically vulnerable families (sub-question 1), and compare them to the identified challenges faced by the school-leavers from the families that are socioeconomically better off (sub-questions 2 and 3) from the perspective of the theory of (in)equality of opportunity. However, the coding of the data and the subsequent analysis shed a light on a slightly different dynamic: it was found that the majority (80%) of the tutors of the classes of school-leavers and all (100%) of the municipal education experts indicated that the challenges experienced by the school-leavers could be divided into two groups:

1. Challenges experienced by the school-leavers irrespectively of their socioeconomic status;
2. Challenges experiences exclusively by the school-leavers from socioeconomically vulnerable families.

In the context of the study and the formulation of the original research questions, the findings of the analysis indicate that the initial assumption of mutual exclusivity between the school-leavers from different socioeconomical backgrounds is not entirely applicable in the city of Siauliai, as there is a great deal of challenges that had been experienced by all of the school-leavers regardless of the socioeconomic factors in play (Figure 2). However, four main challenges experienced exclusively by the school-leavers from socioeconomically vulnerable families have also been indicated.

Table 2. Main challenges faced by the school leavers due to the pandemic.

<b>Main challenges experienced by the school-leavers in Siauliai, Lithuania</b>	<b>Tutors of the school-leavers' classes (percentage of all respondents in this category)</b>	<b>Experts from the Siauliai city municipality Department of education (percentage of all respondents of this category)</b>
<b>Challenges experienced by the school-leavers irrespectively of their socioeconomic status</b>	<b>100% (10 respondents)</b>	<b>100% (2 respondents)</b>
Lack of motivation and concentration	100%	100%
Poor preparation for state-level Matura examinations	100%	100%
Decrease in academic performance	50%	0%
Psychological problems and tension	40%	100%
<b>Challenges experienced exclusively by the school-leavers from socioeconomically vulnerable families</b>	<b>80% (8 respondents)</b>	<b>100%</b>
'Unlevel playing field' in comparison to the school-leavers from socioeconomically better off families	87.5% (7 out of 8 respondents)	100%
Material shortcomings	75% of 8 respondents	100%
Minor parental support and bad influence on behalf of the parents	37.5% of 8 respondents	50%
Inclination towards scepticism regarding the COVID-19	25% of 8 respondents	0%

The numbers do not tally due to overlapping coding of the sub-categories as the respondents indicated more than one of the emerged subthemes.

## 10.2.1 Challenges experienced by the school-leavers' irrespectively of their socioeconomic status

### 10.2.1.1 Lack of motivation and concentration

As Table 2 indicates, the lack of motivation and concentration was one of the main challenges experienced by the school-leavers in general, as specified by both the tutors and the education experts.

In regards to the lack of motivation and concentration among the school-leavers, lack of student control on behalf of the teachers; difficulties in detachment from the previous routine of going to school; increased time spent playing computer games as well as other external temptations; and favourable conditions for unfair behaviour during the tests and examinations were identified as the predominant challenges for the school-leavers.

In the context of the study, detachment from the previously had routine of going to school, and lack of control of the school-leavers' on behalf of the teachers, are highly interrelated. As was presented by the interviewees, lack of concentration and motivation oftentimes derived from a decreased contact with tutors and teachers, as a direct result of the closure of schools and detachment from the previous routines and face-to-face contacts. This particular challenge was emphasized by both the tutors and the education experts as, for instance, Tutor 10 said:

“Before the quarantine began, we also had some issues with the students, but it was possible to address them through direct communication in the classrooms, school halls or elsewhere. At that time, it was possible to motivate or guide them and they would actually listen. Since the quarantine began, most of the students do not even pick up the phone if they suspect that I am calling them to discuss the poor performance during the lessons... If I write them e-mails, it usually takes around two weeks for them to respond.”

The central role that the tutors play in the motivation and guidance of the school-leavers as well as the absence of it during the pandemic was also indicated by Education expert 2:

“There has always been a significant share of pupils that would not talk about their problems related to learning, but by working face-to-face with them, the teachers would quickly spot them and would *lift up* the students”

Increased time spent playing computer games and other external temptations were also identified as some of the factors that resulted in decreasing levels of school-leavers' motivation and concentration. Two tutors (Tutor 4 and Tutor 6) reported that there had been instances when the tutored school-leavers would call and tell them that they could not take the eyes off the screens for nights and days. Additionally, one tutor (Tutor 2) reported that on a

couple of occasions school-leavers would accidentally turn on their cameras and one could see a park or a beach in the background during the lessons.

A particularly striking finding of this subtheme was a widely shared position among the tutors that the transition to the remote learning had created more favourable conditions for unfair behaviour during the tests and examinations. One of the tutors (Tutor 1) even argued that the level of the academic performance of his/her tutored class increased because of this:

“Of course, it (academic performance) has increased. I would give students an assignment, one of them would find all the answers and would send them to the classmates. No, instead of two different versions of tests we have to have at least six.”

#### 10.2.1.2 Poor preparation for the state-level Matura examinations

The second subtheme of the main challenges generally experienced by the school-leavers is highly related to the contextual information provided in the chapters of *Problem area* and *Geographic study area and context for the thesis*, and predominantly deals with the actions that the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport of the Republic of Lithuania has taken as an institution responsible for the organization of the state-level Matura examinations. While the aforementioned problems of lack of motivation and concentration are highly likely to play a role in the preparation for the final examinations, both tutors and the municipal education experts specified that it is the failure of the Ministry to take the changed circumstances into account while organizing the Matura examinations that will be one of the decisive factors in school-leavers' completion of the upper secondary education.

All of the respondents were particularly sceptical towards the already-mentioned decision of the Ministry to not lower the difficulty of the exams (Lithuanian National Broadcaster, 2020e). As was argued by the majority of the tutors, the transition to the remote learning in itself was a long process that had had negative impact on the educational process before teachers and students got accustomed to the changes. In addition to that, it was identified by the respondents that learning process had become comparatively slower and regularly disrupted due to occasional technological errors. The decision not to change the level of difficulty of the exams combined with slower pace of learning had resulted in significantly

increased workload for both the teachers and the students in order to ‘catch up’ with the curriculum. A rather extreme example was reported by the Tutor 6:

“I live in the neighbourhood where a lot of other teachers reside. In March, I normally worked until 3 a.m. in the night time and before going to bed, I would usually go outside to get some fresh air. Every time I would see the lights on in the rooms where other teachers work... At 3 a.m.”

It was interesting to observe that all of the respondents just ironically smiled when I brought up the fact that the Ministry decided to extend all of the examinations by 15 minutes giving more time for the school-leavers to finalize their answers. There was a particularly illustrative response to that given by the Tutor 3 who baldly compared the level of innovation in Lithuania in this context to the one of Estonia:

“Estonians are capable of developing their own cryptocurrency and e-citizenship. National examinations of the school-leavers are also no longer required and other forms of academic assessment are already present there. At the same time, Lithuanians have only come up with a single solution during the quarantine that has lasted for more than a year now – additional 15 minutes during the exam.”

The fact that all of the tutors of the school-leavers’ classes and the municipal education experts expect a general drop in the academic performance during the Matura examination session also reflects the previously illustrated tendency of gradually decreasing scores from the examinations, as the last academic year was marked by the highest number of school-leavers failing the math examination (Lithuanian National Broadcaster, 2020d) and it was the first examinations session in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Since successful completion of Matura examinations is a prerequisite in order to further pursue higher education in Lithuania (Centre for quality assessment in higher education, n.d.), poor preparation for the session could have decisive and far-reaching implications for the ‘second COVID-19 class of 2021’ in general.

### 10.2.1.3 Psychological problems and tension

Psychological problems and tension were a comparatively less frequently occurring subtheme in the interviews conducted, however it was emphasised by both of the experts interviewed.

As the interviews with the education experts showed, the psychological problems had been significantly more severe than other types of challenges, for instance, material or technological ones. Education expert 1 summarized the general situation among the school-leavers in the city of Siauliai:

“People in general need communication and contact with other people. A lot of students have been feeling abandoned and forgotten, many of them have experienced psychological discomfort. Feeling of unsafety and forms of depression have developed.”

Examples provided by one of the tutors who placed a great emphasis on the psychological problems experienced by the school-leaver highly complement the perspective of the tutors. Tutor 5 exemplified:

“I have witnessed an increase in psychological problems since the end of the last year. There was one specifically serious case, where a student needed hospitalization. There were other students who would call me and say that they had just had a *short wave* of depression, the doctor had just given the medicine and left.”

This particular case reflects the so-called ‘secondary’ effects of the pandemic that are related not merely with the expansion of the virus, but rather with the widely spread consequences across other aspects of everyday life. The rapidly increased psychological problems associated to the COVID-19 pandemic also tend to confirm the unfortunate prediction of the World Economic Forum that an unprecedentedly high number of people (around one-third of the world's total population) is likely to develop strong levels of stress, anxiety, anger and depression during this period (World Economic Forum, 2020).

#### 10.2.1.4 Decrease in academic performance

The least frequently occurring theme was the decrease in academic performance. There was a generally shared position among 5 (50%) tutors and 2 (100%) experts which did not report on decrease in academic performance, that school-leavers had generally been performing well during the lessons and the average grades had been similar to the ones before the closure of the schools. This group of respondents reported that school-leavers had managed to adapt to the changed circumstances relatively successfully. However, the main concern of this group was whether the students had actually managed to catch up with the curriculum due to the slower learning and teaching pace during the period of remote learning. In other words, tutors and experts that did not report on the decrease in academic performance worried that the achievements in the class will not correlate with the achievements during the examinations' session, as the educational processes had decelerated while the structure and the difficulty of the examinations had remained unchanged. Such stance therefore illustrates the division between the in-class performance and the expected performance during the exams analysed above, and explains why all of the tutors as well as experts reported the likelihood of poor performance during the exams and did not share the same perspective in the question of the decrease in academic performance. Findings from the group that did not report on the decrease in academic performance were illustratively put by Tutor 1:

“Let’s say that the average grades of the class that I tutor have increased. But the grades were given here and now for a single moment while in the exam you can expect questions from primary school. There is just not enough time to revise it all.”

Coding of the transcripts of this subtheme also indicates that the question of the decrease in academic performance was the one identified by a high level of division as half of the tutors reported that the academic performance of the classes tutored had decreased. It could be argued that the latter finding sheds a light on a remarkably dramatic case where the tutored school-leavers are seen as both poorly prepared for the Matura examinations and struggling to follow the curriculum during the lessons. The reported decrease in academic performance varied from approximately 10% (Tutor 8) to as high as 30% (Tutor 9).

This part of the analysis illustrated the challenges that the school-leavers in the city of Siauliai had been experiencing due to the COVID-19 pandemic irrespectively of their socioeconomic



status. The next part presents the additional challenges reported by the respondents in relation to the challenges faced exclusively by the school-leavers from socioeconomically more vulnerable families.

### 10.2.2 Challenges experienced exclusively by the school-leavers from socioeconomically vulnerable families

This part centres around the responses of the participants to the third set of questions from the semi-structured interviews carried out and is predominantly concerned with the theoretical considerations from the theory of (in)equality of opportunity perspective.

As can be seen from the Table 2, majority of the tutors (8 out of 10) and totality (2 out of 2) of the education experts distinguished the challenges faced by the school-leavers in relation to their respective socioeconomic backgrounds. Two tutors (20%), however, indicated that socioeconomic factors had not played any role in determining the differences in terms of the problems experienced among the school-leavers. The theory-guided subtheme of ‘unlevel playing field’ emerged as the most frequently coded one with ‘material shortcomings’ also falling into the category of high frequency subthemes (with 7 and 6 out of 8 respondents included in the latter categories respectively).

#### 10.2.2.1 ‘Unlevel playing field’ compared to the school-leavers from socioeconomically better off families

The theme of ‘unlevel playing field’ emerged as a direct result of the answers to the 11<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> question from the interview guide for tutors and education experts respectively. This subtheme derived from the famous metaphor of ‘levelling the playing field’ by Roamer (in Ferreira et al., 2015, p, 9) and refers to the external factors such as parental background, socioeconomic factors, household income etc., that unfairly (negatively or positively) impact one’s chances to achieve desired results or ‘compete’ on equal terms. In the context of the interviews conducted, school-leavers’ ability to participate in the remote education processes equally was regarded as the metaphorical ‘playing field’ and the role of their respective socioeconomic backgrounds was conceived as the metaphorical bumps and humps of that field.

The findings indicated that the socioeconomic factors had marginalised the more vulnerable school-leavers and this was a perspective shared by both the tutors and the education experts. Education expert 2, when asked about what he or she thinks about the current ‘playing field’ responded:

“If we are to put all of the school-leavers into a single playing field, some of the school-leavers from the most vulnerable families will be outside of that field. The pandemic brought the long-established problems of social inequality to light. If we tried our best to hide this problem before the pandemic, it has now become more evident than ever.”

The latter perspective on the ‘levelness of the playing’ field was complemented by Tutor 7 who, in a similar manner and even the formulation of words, argued that “some of the school leavers are now outside the playing ground due to the home environment, influence of parents and friends”.

Subsequent analysis of the three more specific subthemes from the same category will now illustrate the concrete forms in which the levelness of the metaphorical playing field is disrupted.

#### 10.2.2.2 Material shortcomings

Material shortcomings on behalf of the school-leavers from socioeconomically more vulnerable families was among the most of recurring subthemes among both the tutors and the experts. However, and rather surprisingly, all of the respondents agreed that material technological problems (computers, cameras etc.) had only been of minor importance as the ones in need were provided by the schools already during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. It worth recalling that in March 2020, 35 thousand computers were purchased and handed out to the schools by the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport (Lithuanian National Broadcaster, 2020b).

However, other forms of material shortcomings had emerged reflecting the inequality among the school-leavers from differing socioeconomic backgrounds. The most pressing material shortcoming emphasised by both the tutors and the education experts was the absence of a quiet room or personal space at the place of residence in order to successfully study at home.

As indicated by the respondents, while the students from the families that are better off socioeconomically had their separate rooms or, in one case, even a separate apartment (Tutor 10), school-leavers from more vulnerable environments were oftentimes sharing their room with other family members. As indicated by the Tutor 2, there was a case in his or her class where four family members would live in a one-room apartment. In the cases of the Tutor 1 and Tutor 5, situations were even more extreme: students were living at one-room apartments after their parents had lost their jobs because of the pandemic rendering turning on the camera or microphone for the lessons virtually impossible due to the distractions from the family members.

The aforementioned findings from the tutors were also supported by the indications of Education expert 2 and presentation of other case from a socioeconomically vulnerable environment:

“There was one case reported where the entire family shared a single room and there were children studying and parents consuming alcohol there”.

However, an important element was added by the experts – all of the students from socioeconomically vulnerable families were allowed to return to schools on individual basis from February 2021. The doors were once again open for them if they could not successfully study at home. Socioeconomically more vulnerable students would not meet their teachers or their classmates there, but it was finally possible for them to use the school facilities, have a quiet place to study and satisfactory access to the tools needed for appropriate participation in the lessons. Nevertheless, before returning to schools, the students from most vulnerable socioeconomic backgrounds in the city of Siauliai had spent 5 months learning from home under severe conditions and with no alternatives.

#### 10.2.2.3 Minor parental support and bad influence on behalf of the parents.

A significantly smaller share of the respondents also placed an emphasis on the lack of the parental support and sometimes even their bad influence on the children as one of the problems experienced exclusively by the school-leavers from socioeconomically more vulnerable families. It goes without saying that the aforementioned case where parents

consumed alcohol next to their studying children falls into the latter category. During the coding process tendencies of the parents to underestimate and pay little attention the remote learning has been identified. For instance, there was one parent in the class of school-leavers of Tutor 8 who was constantly writing messages to his or her children during the lessons despite knowing the schedule of the lessons and the breaks. Even more illustrative cases were reported by Tutor 10 during the school closure:

“It was obvious that in the families where parents most likely did not have higher education, the attitude towards their children education was clear – first you do the chores and help out in the garden, and then you will catch up with the lessons. One time, mother of one of the school-leavers even wrote me an email saying that her daughter would not show up during the lesson because she was helping her doing the grocery shopping”.

Education experts also informed that approximately 5% of all of the school-leavers in the city of Siauliai live in the families where they have “no support, and quite contrary, are being constantly demotivated”. As a consequence, lack of parental support and even their bad influence constitute the bumps and humps in the metaphorical ‘playing field’ for the school-leavers that are socioeconomically worse off.

#### 10.2.2.4 Inclination towards scepticism regarding the COVID-19

The emergence of this subtheme in interviews with two tutors of the school-leavers’ class was highly surprising and unanticipated. However, it will only be briefly noted that two tutors (Tutor 1 and Tutor 10) had experienced a situation where the school-leavers would refuse to come back to schools in May if regular COVID-19 tests were to be performed. Those students and their parents were both referred by the tutors as ‘strong anti-vaxxers’. Parents of the two school-leavers were characterized by low-level of educational attainment; employment in construction and manufacturing sectors; and a belief that COVID-19 tests were infringement of their human rights.

This part of the analysis has presented the main additional challenges that had been faced exclusively by the school-leavers from socioeconomically vulnerable families. The next part discusses the main findings.

### 10.3 Discussion of the main findings

Thematic qualitative content analysis of the semi-structured interviews shed a light on the themes that allow for a more systematic and detailed understanding of the subject of analysis.

First of all, the initial inductive approach to the analysis of the data and careful coding of the data illustrated that the originally formulated research sub-questions were not entirely applicable for the study, since the challenges experienced by the school-leavers during the COVID-19 pandemic had not been mutually exclusive, as was reported by the participants of the interviews. As was found in the analysis, 100% of the respondents, both tutors and experts, reported that there had been at least one form of challenges that was shared by school-leavers in general, irrespectively of their socioeconomic environments. The most frequently occurring problems among school-leavers in Siauliai regardless of the socioeconomic factors, were poor preparation for state-level Matura examinations; lack of motivation and concentration; psychological problems and tension; and decrease in academic performance.

Despite the need for a slight alteration of the sub-questions, the research question of this was answered through the execution of the second part of the analysis. It is worth recalling that the main objective of this paper was to illustrate the ways in which the challenges posed by the closure of educational institutions during the quarantine differ between school-leavers from socially disadvantaged families and families that are socioeconomically better off in Siauliai, Lithuania. The main difference between these two groups lays in the finding that there was an additional set of challenges faced exclusively by the school-leavers from comparatively socioeconomically more vulnerable families, while no additional challenges were exclusively reported for the school-leavers from families that are better off in socioeconomic terms.

As a consequence, an answer to the research question could be as follows: *while both groups of the school-leavers share some of the challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic, the situation of the school-leavers from socioeconomically more vulnerable families is more challenging due to the additional problems restricted to this group.* In other words, it could be said that all of the problems experienced by the school-leavers from the families that are better off socioeconomically are also experienced by the school-leavers that are from more vulnerable families, *but not vice versa.*

From a theoretical approach of the theory of (in)equality of opportunity, the findings are particularly illustrative as they indicate that the main differences between the two groups of school-leavers have to do with the external factors over which the school-leavers have no control (for example, material shortcomings or lack of the parental support). The findings of the analysis also reflect the metaphorical idea of the 'playing field' and indicate that school-leavers from socioeconomically more vulnerable families are at risk of falling out of this 'playing field' at all.

As was repeatedly noted throughout this paper, this study seeks to contribute to the normative and prescriptive tradition of the proponents of the theory of (in)equality of opportunity and, as a consequence an initiative is presented in the next part of the paper that was set up in the city of Siauliai highly on the findings of this paper.

## 11 Established initiative to address identified problems: “*Siauliai auga*” (“Siauliai grows”)

As was already mentioned, interviews with the tutors and the experts were conducted in April and March 2021 with the preliminary themes for coding emerging already in the end of March. Through the communication with experts and tutors, I had familiarized with the problematique of the education sector during the COVID-19, and three main challenges initially attracted my attention in particular: (1.) lack of motivation and concentration among the school-leavers; (2.) poor preparation for the Matura examinations; (3.) and an increased workload among the teachers. Already by mid-April, the full picture of the main problems faced by the school-leavers had started to emerge from the interviews collected. As the preliminary main codes had been established and the forms of inequality of opportunity began to come to the surface, I started looking for the possible means to address this problem and attempt to contribute for ‘the equalization’ of the opportunities. Almost a month later, on May 7, after a close cooperation between the Siauliai City Municipality and Vilnius University, initiative “Siauliai grows” was established, and I was assigned to be responsible for its successful operation.

"Siauliai auga" is a joint project of Siauliai City Municipality and Vilnius University, which has been aimed to inspire and encourage school-leavers from the city of Siauliai as well as to help them to better prepare for the final exams. The main idea of the project is that the students from Vilnius University who study predominantly pedagogical sciences and are recommended by their professors, voluntarily become the teachers and consultants for the school-leavers from Siauliai during the last month before the exam session. Consultations with those teachers take place online, in the evening and after the formal lessons, at the time that suits the school-leavers the best. The most important aspect is that the consultations serve as a free-of-charge replacement of private tutors commonly employed by the students that are better off socioeconomically; and are therefore freely accessible to all of the students irrespectively of their socioeconomic indicators.

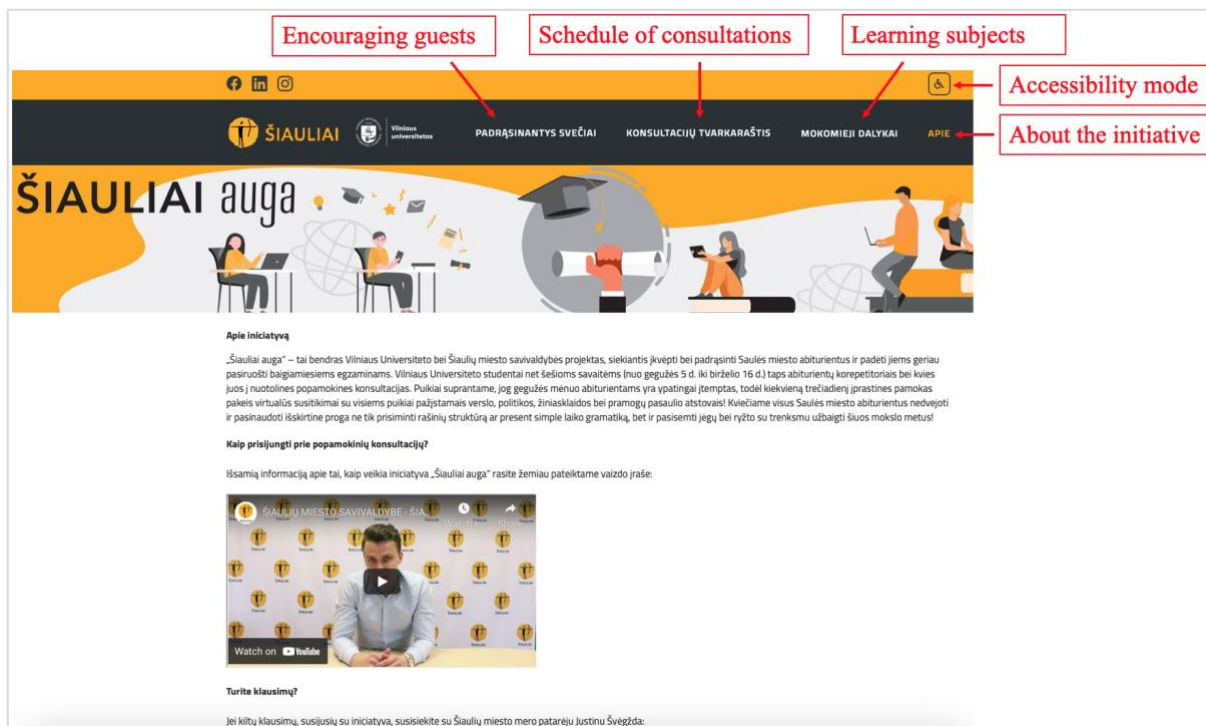


Figure 6. Home page of the “Siauliai auga” initiative website. It can be accessed via link: <https://www.siauliai.lt/auga>.

The “Siauliai auga” project has also created well-suited conditions for time planning, as the consultations have been recorded, the archives have been freely accessible to the school-leavers whenever wanted. Another distinctive characteristic of this project has also been the fact that the school-leavers themselves could decide on the themes of consultations, and the teachers have been provided with all the teaching material in accordance to the structure of the Matura examinations. As a consequence, all of the school-leavers have been given the conditions to acquire a free-of-charge qualify, professional assistance from the Vilnius University students that are soon to become teachers themselves; access the consultations at the suitable time; and decide on the themes that should be revised before the examination. Additionally, there have been no requirements for any of the school-leavers to turn on their cameras or microphones since participation in the programme and the use of consultations is voluntary.

In addition to that, the problems of concentration and motivation among the school-leavers have also been addressed by turning every Wednesday of the initiative period into a day of an informal meeting with special guest: a well-known representative of business, politics, media or entertainment (‘encouraging guests’). Since the very first week, informal meetings with



public people and well-known professionals on Wednesdays, have become the days of the highest attendance and liveliness among the school leavers.

At the last day of writing this paper (June 14, 2021), the “Siauliai auga” project has reached its last week as the Matura examination session began. There are currently 144 school-leavers from the city of Siauliai using the platform of consultations on regular basis in order to fill the existing gap in knowledge before the exams; and there are 17 teachers from the Vilnius university who consult the school leavers on the following learning subjects: Math; Lithuanian language and literature; English language and literature; Russian language and literature; History; and Biology. Since the first week of the initiative, the consultations were held from Mondays to Fridays from 4 p.m. to 7 p.m. or even later (‘schedule of consultations’).

The “Siauliai auga” initiative has received acknowledgment from both the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport, and the former President of the Republic of Lithuania as an exemplary case of successful interinstitutional cooperation between the higher education institution and the municipality.

## 12 Conclusion

This paper has attempted to not only shed a light on the forms of inequalities of opportunity that have emerged among the school-leavers from different socioeconomic environments in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic but also to offer possible, real-life solutions to the identified problems in a form of the initiative “Siauliai auga”.

As the analysis indicated, a group of challenges was generally shared by the school-leavers, irrespectively of their socioeconomic backgrounds, namely poor preparation for the state-level Matura examinations; lack of motivation and concentration; psychological problems; and decrease in academic performance. The initiative ‘Siauliai auga’ placed a specific emphasis on the provision of equal opportunities for the school-leavers to consult with the teachers from Vilnius university on a case-by-case individual basis in order to address their individual gaps in the existing knowledge and help to fill them. Lack of motivation among the school-leavers has been addressed by the regular meetings with the so-called ‘Encouraging guests’ every Wednesday; while the psychological problems emerging among the school-leavers have been addressed in the opportunities created by the initiative to find new friends and establish new contacts, as the initiative has been dedicated for the entire class of the school-leavers of 2021 and, as a consequence, school-leavers have been participating in the same consultations of the initiative together with previously the peers that they have not previously met.

As the analysis also indicated, forms of (in)equality of opportunity have also been witnessed by majority of the tutors and the education experts in the context of the education process during the COVID-19 pandemic among the school-leavers. In relation to the findings, the initiative “Siauliai auga” has attempted to level the ‘playing field’ as the assistance from the tutors has been freely accessible to the school-leavers irrespectively of their socioeconomic status. In other words, all of the school-leavers without exceptions have had free access to logging in to the lessons; accessing the teaching material at the time that suits them; and revision of the most pressing parts from the curriculum on individual basis. It is important to specify that the initiative was set up during the period when the school-leavers returned to schools (May 10, 2021) and were given unlimited access to the school facilities, meaning that the problem of material shortcomings in the form of absence of personal space, no longer

played a significant role in the context. The problem of the lack of parental support and their possible bad influence on the children, however, was not addressed by the initiative “Siauliai auga”.

In conclusion, the main objective of this study was to identify and analyse the forms of inequality of opportunity among the school-leavers in Siauliai depending on their socioeconomic backgrounds and illustrate practical measures that could address the identified problems in real life.

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## 14 Appendices

### 14.1 Interview guide for the tutors of the classes of school-leavers

**The first set of questions served to provide the interview with more general information about the participants of the interview, i.e., the tutors of school-leavers' classes. The priority was given to the tutors that had been working with this year school-leavers for a prolonged period of time by the time the interview took place (from 9<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> grade (12<sup>th</sup>-graders are the school-leavers) in the upper-secondary education institution, according to the Lithuanian education system, i. e. 4 years; or at least since before the first COVID-19 lockdown in March, 2020) and therefore had well-established relationships with them and their families.**

1. For how long have you been tutoring your class of this year's school-leavers?
2. **How would you describe your relationship with the class that you tutor?**

How often do you communicate? How often do you set up class-tutor meetings?

Would you describe your communication with the class as more formal or informal?

Do you prefer group-level or individual-level communication with your students? Do you think that your students trust you to an extent that they feel free to get in touch with you even if they have school-unrelated questions?

3. **How would you describe your relationship with the parents of the school-leavers that you tutor?**

How often do you get in touch with the parents of your students? How often do you set-up tutor-parents meetings? Do you prefer more formal or informal means of communication with the parents of your students? Do you feel that the parents feel free to talk to you about more personal and family-related issues?

**The second set of questions is related to the education process during the COVID-19 pandemic.**

4. How has the COVID-19 pandemic changed the education process for the class that you tutor?
5. Could you give some specific examples?
6. What, if any, challenges posed by the lockdown of your school have you and the class that you tutor faced?
7. Could you give some specific examples?

**The last set of questions addresses the problems of inequality in the education processes during the lockdown.**

8. In the contact with your students and their parents, have you noticed any tendencies that students would adapt and have access to online learning differently?
9. Could you exemplify?
10. Do you think that the question of inequality or socioeconomic status plays any part in this context? If so, how?
11. The Ministry of Education, Science and Sport of the Republic of Lithuania oftentimes use a metaphor of the “level playing field” meaning that the pupils across Lithuania have equal abilities to access education, learning resources, even chances to succeed etc. despite their socioeconomic status or other external factors. Do you think that this “field” has changed in any way during the lockdown of the schools? If so, how?
12. Do you think the COVID-19 pandemic will have any impact on the school-leavers’ preparedness for the maturity examinations in the summer of 2021? If so, how?

13. Do you think that the question of inequality will play any part in the school-leavers' abilities to prepare for the maturity examinations?

14. Do you have anything you want to add?

#### 14.2 Interview guide for the experts from the Education department of the Siauliai city municipality

**Interview guide for the experts from the Education department of the Siauliai city municipality differed from the one that was designed for the tutors of the school-leavers classes primarily because the experts generally do not work with the school-leavers directly but rather talk to the representatives of schools' students, parents and teachers. However, through a regular communication and meetings with representatives of the schools during the COVID-19 pandemic, the experts of the Department had acquired an in-depth knowledge regarding the main concerns and challenges experienced by the school-leavers as well as possible inequalities of opportunities that had emerged among them due to differences of their respective socioeconomic backgrounds by the time the interviews took place. Consequently, the data collected in the form of interviews with the experts was employed as a tool of triangulation in analyzing data and the indicated patterns were consequently compared with the patterns from the interviews with the tutors of the classes of school leavers. The list of questions for the experts is as follows:**

1. For how long have you been working as an expert in the Siauliai city municipality Department of Education?
2. How has the COVID-19 pandemic changed the education process for the school-leavers in the city of Siauliai?
3. Could you give some specific examples?
4. What, if any, have been the main challenges faced by the school-leavers due to the lockdown of the educational institutions in Siauliai?

5. Could you give some specific examples?
6. In the regular contact with representatives of the schools, have you noticed any tendencies that the school-leavers would adapt and have access to online learning differently?
7. Could you exemplify?
8. Do you think that the question of inequality or socioeconomic status plays any part in this context? If so, how?
9. The Ministry of Education, Science and Sport of the Republic of Lithuania oftentimes use a metaphor of the “level playing field” meaning that the pupils across Lithuania have equal abilities to access education, learning resources, even chances to succeed etc. despite their socioeconomic status or other external factors. Do you think that this “field” has changed in any way during the lockdown of the schools? If so, how?
10. Do you think the COVID-19 pandemic will have any impact on the school-leavers’ preparedness for the maturity examinations in the summer of 2021? If so, how?
11. Do you think that the question of inequality will play any part in the school-leavers’ abilities to prepare for the maturity examinations?
12. Do you have anything you want to add?