



## ARTICLE

### Teachers in new situations during the COVID-19 period: impact on professional collaboration and quality of teaching

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## Teachers in new situations during the COVID-19 period: impact on professional collaboration and quality of teaching

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### Abstract

In late February of 2020 the first COVID-19 cases were confirmed in Iceland. The Icelandic government declared a four-week assembly ban, which included various restrictions that forced teachers to change their teaching methods and organisation. The aim of this study was to gain insight into the experience of teachers during this time and how it affected teachers' professional collaboration and teaching quality. COVID-19 restrictions in schools forced school leaders and teachers to react quickly and organise and implement students' education according to constantly changing rules as the pandemic evolved. Teachers in each school were suddenly given new positions as entrepreneurs but at the same time were expected to maintain educational standards. These changed circumstances imposed new challenges within the schools, for example which competence criteria should be highlighted above others, which teaching methods should be used, what teaching platform to use and how to assess students' work. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with thirteen teachers from three compulsory schools in Iceland in April 2020 at the peak of the first wave of the pandemic. Focus was placed on changes that affected teachers' professional collaboration, teaching quality and students' learning. Findings indicate that teachers focused on "core subjects" and ignored other subjects, academic requirements were lowered, and teachers had to teach subjects that were not part of their specialization. The findings also show that some teachers experienced powerlessness and fear.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, quality of teaching, teachers' professionalism, teaching in crisis, students' well-being

## **Introduction**

In Iceland, the first cases of COVID-19 were confirmed in late February of 2020. In mid-March a four-week assembly ban was declared to halt the spread of the virus, which included various restrictions that significantly affected the school system. Icelandic compulsory school buildings remained open to some degree while upper secondary school and University buildings were fully closed and operated entirely online. Even though compulsory schools remained partly open there were no common guidelines for implementation of restrictions within schools from the Ministry of Education so schools and municipalities implemented the restrictions in various ways. In compulsory schools, the school day became a mixture of home-schooling and in-class attendance with variations depending on student age and school resources. Instantaneously, most teachers had to adapt to remote teaching practises and students were expected to compensate for the time lost at school with home learning. Teachers reported spending more time on planning and finding ways to meet the curriculum changes that resulted from the COVID-19 restrictions (Jónsdóttir, 2020). Research also found that there were considerable discrepancies in the digital knowledge among teachers and in some schools, access to adequate technical solutions was not present (Björnsdóttir and Ásgrímsdóttir, 2020).

The sudden shift to remote teaching exposed to some extent the different conditions in the homes of Icelandic students, revealing an unexpected inequality. Björnsdóttir and Ásgrímsdóttir (2020) found that teachers from many parts of the country described homes that were ill-equipped to meet students sudden need for access to digital technology as well as parents that had very limited computer skills, making it difficult for them to assist younger students. Immigrant children and children with lower socio-economic background were especially affected and were more often missing from school than their classmates (Björnsdóttir and Ásgrímsdóttir, 2020; Jónsdóttir, 2020). However, Jónsdóttir (2020) also found that school leaders and teachers were very aware of the different circumstances of students and placed increased emphasis on keeping parents and guardians of their students well informed. As a result, the relations between home and school seem to have increased during the first wave of the pandemic.

Research shows that these unprecedented circumstances of social restrictions that arose during the first wave of the pandemic influenced the mental well-being of both Icelandic teachers and students. A study by Halldórsdóttir et al. (2021) showed that concerns regarding others contracting COVID-19, changes in school routines, isolation and not meeting friends in person, greatly affected the mental well-being among Icelandic youth during the pandemic. The negative impact on well-being was evident among both girls and boys but more pronounced among girls. Teachers were concerned both for themselves and their loved ones as well as for the well-being of their students. Research focused on the mental well-being of teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic showed that Icelandic teachers experienced increased stress and significantly increased symptoms of burnout (Rafnsdóttir and Sigursteinsdóttir, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic has brought with it a new reality and teaching and learning under pandemic-induced conditions is currently being researched all over the world. Closures and restrictions in educational institutions have affected both students and teachers world-wide and the various decisions that have been made are debated, meaning that it is not always clear whether

decisions were made with the quality of education in mind. New local research findings are an important contribution to the global research field. This study gives insight into the experiences of teachers during the COVID-19 restrictions in Iceland and how it affected teachers' professional collaboration and teaching quality. The findings of this study will therefore contribute to the overall understanding of teachers experience of the global COVID-19 pandemic.

### **The Icelandic school system**

The Icelandic school system is divided into four levels: pre-primary school education (leikskóli), compulsory education (grunnskóli), upper secondary education (framhaldsskóli) and university level (háskóli). Compulsory education is organised in a single structured system, where primary and lower secondary education form part of the same school level that generally takes place in the same school. Legislation on compulsory education stipulates that education shall be mandatory for children and adolescents between the ages of six and sixteen (Government of Iceland, n.d.). Over the past few decades, the school system has moved towards increased independence of each school such that control has shifted to some extent from central control to decentralized control. A major change in this direction took place in 1995 when control of primary schools was transferred from the state level to the municipality level (Hansen et al., 2008). Iceland has a national curriculum that schools follow but each school has a certain leeway for professional decisions.

The main objective of the general school system is to prepare all students as well as possible for a future in a democratic society, in accordance with relevant laws and regulations. Education policy is grounded in the ideology of inclusive schools where students can attend and be welcomed in their neighbourhood schools in age-appropriate, regular classes and are supported to learn and participate in all aspects of school life. All compulsory schools should ensure access to quality education for all students by effectively meeting their diverse needs in an accepting, respectful and supportive way (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2012). The Compulsory School Act (No 91/2008) also states that equal opportunities should be awarded to students based on their abilities, interests, and personalities. Therefore, teachers are expected to make an effort to get to know each student and their guardians in order to meet these goals. In a policy document issued by the city of Reykjavík, it is emphasised that the schoolwork and school environment should be in constant development to meet a diverse body of students. Therefore, schools should always strive for an environment in which all students can be respected and are able to develop their abilities to the fullest (Reykjavík City School and Leisure Council, 2012).

### **Literature and background**

In line with the aim of the study and the research question, the focus of the literature and background is on teaching quality, teachers' professionalism, teaching practices, teaching in crisis, and collaboration.

#### **Teaching quality**

There is a general agreement among scholars that teaching quality is decisive in student learning and has more effect on achievement than several other factors, including socio-economic background, class

size, classroom climate, and teacher's years of experience and formal training (Hanushek et al., 2014; Hattie, 2009; Sanders and Horn, 1998). This agreement is supported by the citations by scholars and policy makers to Sanders and Horn's conclusion in 1998 that teachers are the single largest value adding factor to student learning (Sanders and Horn, 1998). However, even where scholars agree that teaching quality is a crucial factor in student learning, there is little consensus as to what exactly teaching quality is and in what specific ways it makes a difference in student outcomes.

Over the past decades, scholars have attempted to conceptualize and define effective teaching (Baumert et al., 2010; Fischer and Neumann, 2012; Lipowsky et al., 2009; Raudenbush, 2008; Vieluf and Klieme, 2011) and some argue that quality in teaching is a multidimensional phenomenon that requires multiple overlapping complementary strategies to study (Croninger et al., 2012). While others find that competing theoretical and methodological tactics bring little clarity to the theoretical foundations of quality teaching (Grossman and McDonald, 2008; Cochran-Smith and Villegas, 2015). Even though there is some lack of theoretical clarity, a growing consensus supports a few common dimensions for teaching quality. These dimensions relate to the clarity of instruction, classroom discourse, cognitive activation, and supportive climate (Klette et al., 2017). It stands to reason that this unprecedented situation of partially closed schools, social distancing and other COVID related restrictions in the school system affects all of these four dimensions of teaching quality.

The instantaneous transition from face-to-face teaching and learning to part time schooling and online schooling was mentally and emotionally challenging for both teachers and students. Even though the school system tried their best to continue quality education for all in this situation, teaching quality was without a doubt diminished. There is no universal pedagogy for distance learning. Different age groups and different subjects require different approaches (Pokhrel and Chhetri, 2021). It is possible that the academic progress of characteristically motivated learners will be relatively unaffected as they are able to learn in less supervised settings and need perhaps less guidance from the teacher. However, vulnerable groups such as students with special educational needs, immigrant children and students that are less independent or with limited access to digital technology, will be more affected (Trzcińska-Król, 2020). In a report published in the end of March 2020, regarding pedagogy in an unfolding pandemic, Doucet et al. (2020) stress the importance of ensuring "Maslow before Bloom" meaning that the safety and well-being of students should be placed before academic demands. Only when that has been accomplished is it possible to consider long term solutions that address educational inequities exposed when school attendance is limited.

Teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic is a new mode of crisis situation that the world has not seen in modern times. However, learnings from previous and other crisis situations can, to limited extent, be compared to the crisis brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. There is some literature available regarding ways to support the educational needs of refugee children and how to help students find ways to deal with crisis and succeed at the same time (Dovigo, 2020). This literature highlights a sudden 'wall' halts students' ability to engage in learning in crisis situations and that it does not impact all students in the same way. It is therefore important that teachers are able to recognise various challenges that students might be facing during crisis situations. As Stewart (2011) suggests, by

acknowledging and discussing these challenges, students are more likely to feel supported and are less likely to withdraw and be inactive in their education.

### **Teachers' professionalism**

The concept of teacher professionalism entails a certain obligation to serve students in relation to educational quality and students well-being (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2012). This obligation towards students is threefold and refers to skills, knowledge and care. Teachers' professionalism is also based on the attitudes and the ambitions of teachers towards their work and includes their ambitions for professional development with the aim of furthering and deepening their knowledge and skills (Kristinsson, 2013). Aðalbjarnardóttir (2002) argues that the key aspects of teachers' professionalism are related to self-respect and respect of others, self-reflection, and reflection on one's work to increase one's own knowledge and be open to innovation. Because of rapid societal changes in recent decades and a changed outlook on teaching and learning, teachers need to be able to respond to new professional challenges, for example assess which innovations are best suited to meet the diverse needs of students. Thus, an important part of teachers' professionalism is to evaluate how new technological innovations should be used in teaching to best prepare students for the future (Cortes et al., 2016). The teaching profession is diverse in nature where each year the professionalism of primary school teachers is challenged when they are faced with new student groups, new materials, and a new beginning with new challenges.

Effective teaching depends, among other things, on the control teachers demonstrate in their classrooms and the learning conditions they provide for their students. As leaders in the classroom, teachers need to offer a variety of teaching methods, aim towards students' interest and guide students in their studies in a way that suits each student at any given time (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2012). It is stated in the Icelandic compulsory school act (91/2008) that each student's supervisory teacher should closely monitor learning and the general well-being of students, guide them in their studies, assist and advise them on personal matters and strengthen communication between the school and students' homes. Teachers are expected to monitor students' well-being and encourage students to share knowledge and experience with fellow students and encourage them to help and support each other in mutual understanding. These goals are clear in the National Curriculum Guide for Compulsory Schools (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2012) and relate to learning as a social practice placed in a social context with other students. From a social point of view, teachers play an important role in preparing students for a future.

### **Teaching practices**

Alongside increased knowledge in education and changes in society, more emphasis is being placed on meeting students' individual needs that in turn calls for a diverse approach to teaching and learning. The development within Icelandic compulsory schools has been, among other things, directed at equality, diverse teaching methods and information technology. Individual schools are at various stages in this developmental process depending, to some extent, on the initiative of school administrators and individual teachers. According to a report by the Ministry of Education (2010), called *'Shaping Education, the development of educational policy in Iceland in a European context'*, emphasis on school

development at the time was mainly directed towards meeting the changing needs of students with the goal of improving their academic achievement with increased flexibility.

In recent years, developmental focus has been directed towards developmental work regarding the use of information and computer technology where specific schools have been at the forefront. The emphasis of this development within schools has mostly been directed at students' individual work and less on students' communication. When COVID-19 restrictions became a reality in mid-March of 2020, most teachers instantly had to adapt to remote teaching practices. In many schools the use of communication programs such as Google classroom, Meet, Seesaw and Zoom was used for students to continue their studies, for teachers to communicate with students, and to give students the opportunity to communicate with each other. Teachers were, therefore, tasked with choosing a learning platform and creating a new learning environment to meet the COVID-19 restrictions. Being responsive to new challenges is, according to the National curriculum guide for compulsory schools (MESC, 2012), one of many responsibilities of teachers. They need to provide students with a learning environment that is diverse, supportive, encouraging and stimulating. Therefore, teachers need to be reactive in new situations and quick to adapt the learning environment to the needs of students so that they can flourish socially and academically (Guðjónsdóttir and Óskarsdóttir, 2016). A study by Guðmundsdóttir and Hatlevik (2018) on digital competences and teachers, shows considerable variation in the competence of new teachers in the use of new technology for teaching and learning. They argued that the actual use of information and community technology remains below expectations. Furthermore, they claim that "digital technology in education is a controversial topic that arouses both positive and negative dispositions in teachers and can be seen as one of the conflicting areas in the debate regarding content of schooling" (p.225).

### **Collaboration**

A large part of teachers' work is collaboration; collaboration with colleagues within the school, parents and guardians and the specialists that each student needs at any given time, whether they are social workers, psychologists, speech pathologists or other professionals. The number of professionals, other than classroom teachers, has been increasing in Icelandic schools. However, a study by Matthíasdóttir et al. (2013), showed that cooperation between classroom teachers and specialized teachers lacks effectiveness due to lack of active collaboration. There is a strong connection between collaboration of any kind and the ideology of a learning community, which implementation in schools can strengthen infrastructure and reform in the school system (European Agency, 2017; Fagráð um símenntun og starfsþróun kennara, 2016). There is a general consensus among scholars that the decisive characteristics of a learning community are: mutual professional support for teaching and learning, shared vision and values, professional development and collaborative professionalism, which is reflected in, among other things, social climate that supports collaboration, team teaching and solution-oriented dialogue, reflection and knowledge creation (Svanbjörnsdóttir, 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted even further the importance of active collaboration between teachers since change brings opportunities for innovative solutions, and the possibility to learn from others.

## Teaching in crisis

The above literature discusses teaching and education under 'normal' situations, but recent and current pandemic conditions raise the question whether these theoretical concepts and ideas apply as well in situations of crisis like the COVID-19 period has proven to be. The COVID-19 pandemic is different in fundamental ways from crises that stem from war for example, mainly because effect of the pandemic was felt all over the world and for most people it causes temporary changes to their daily life's. A new study by Pozo et al. (2021) among 1,403 primary and secondary education teachers from Spain, analysed the activities carried out during the COVID-19 time through digital technologies and the conceptions of teaching and learning that they reflected. Their main findings were that teachers used reproductive activities more frequently than constructive ones and most activities favoured verbal and attitudinal learning. The cooperative activities were the least frequent. The authors (Pozo et al., 2021) refer to the COVID-19 situation as a *critical global incident* where teachers had no other options than to change their classrooms into online learning spaces. They describe a *critical incident* as "an unexpected situation that hinders the development of a planned activity" and "that, by exceeding a certain emotional threshold, puts the identity in crisis and obliges teachers to review their concepts, strategies, and feelings" (p.1). These incidents can thus be a meaningful resource for making changes in learning practices as they call for reflection and reconstruction.

This period has been an opportunity to explore various elements of teaching and learning under these ab-normal circumstances and how teachers react and practice their professionalism in an unforeseen situation. Teachers had to act on emergency responses when the pandemic affected their daily routine and their student's, by the physical closure of schools that forced teachers to adapt to remote teaching practises. Teachers' agency has therefore gained interest in relation to the COVID-19 crisis (Damşa et al., 2021). Agency can have various meanings but for this context we build on what Damşa et al. (2021) refer to as "the capacity of people to act upon their ideas and plans to transform current thinking for practice" (p.2). They believe it is central to the ways teachers deal with pandemic-related constraints and engage in potential opportunities generated by this unprecedented situation. In numerous research and discussion groups regarding COVID-19 and education, it has become evident that for many teachers the pandemic was their first experience teaching in a crisis situation and many of them felt alone and reported a lack of guidance on best practices (Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE), 2020).

To explore how the changes brought on by the pandemic affected the work of teachers we put forth the following question: What effect did the changed practices during COVID-19 have on teachers' professional collaboration and teaching quality?

## Methods

The aim of this qualitative study was to gain understanding and shed light on the experience of schoolteachers regarding their teaching during the time of COVID-19 restrictions. Our approach is phenomenological in nature as the focus is on the experience from the first-person point of view. We aim to describe, understand, and interpret the meanings of participant's experiences. Using a



phenomenological approach enabled us to identify the essence of the shared experiences (Creswell, 2012). The study was conducted in Iceland during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, in April 2020 at the time of the first assembly ban posed by the Icelandic government. We conducted semi-structured interviews with 13 teachers, where 8 were classroom teachers and 5 were special education teachers. The participating teachers were employed in three Icelandic compulsory schools.

The interviews were conducted in April, before the 4<sup>th</sup> May 2020 when the first assembly ban was lifted and schools were able to operate normally again. Two of the participating schools are in the capital area and one is in an urban area. The schools differ in terms of size and practices and the pandemic affected them differently. One school had to close all school buildings temporarily due to number of COVID-19 infections within the school. Due to the assembly ban and social distancing guidelines that were being enforced at the time, all the interviews took place via the Google Meet account of one of the researchers that had been assessed specifically with regard to privacy (Þorsteinsdóttir, 2020). Because the interviews were conducted remotely some of the interviews might have been shorter than if conducted face to face. The shortest interview lasted around 20 minutes but others up to 60 minutes. We used open-ended questions aligned with the objectives of the study and the phenomenological approach highlighting the first-person point of view and participants' experience. The questions used were pre-tested with two teachers. The questions that guided the interviews were grouped in six categories: (1) general (thoughts on COVID-19), (2) well-being and support, (3) teaching and working environment, (4) responsibility and duties, (5) the future and (6) other issues. Both the categories and the questions were formulated according to the National Curriculum regarding the role of schools and teachers' responsibilities as well as discussion among teachers and teachers' unions regarding teacher and student roles and well-being. The interviews were transcribed (Creswell, 2012) and preliminary analysis was done parallel with transcription of the interviews: step 1 and 2 by Braun et al., (2018) and followed with steps 3 to 6 in Braun et al., (2018) framework of thematic analysis. Every step in the analysis process was reviewed according to the research question. The language of the interviews was Icelandic, as all participants and researchers are native Icelandic speakers. Direct quotes were translated into English by the authors for the purpose of this paper. All privacy considerations were according to Icelandic data protection and the processing of personal data act (no 90/2018). To ensure anonymity and prevent traceability, teachers were all given pseudonyms.

## Findings

In line with the research question - *What effect did the changed practices during COVID-19 have on teachers' professional collaboration and teaching quality?* - the findings are presented according to four main themes that all relate to changed practices during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. The themes are: focus on core subjects; less academic demand; professional work and collaboration; and the impact of insecurity on teaching quality.

### Focus on core subjects

In the three schools, emphasis was placed on core subjects while all other subjects were mostly ignored. The reference timetable, which states the minimum number of lessons per subject, was also

discounted to a large extent, mainly because the time teachers had at their disposal with students in the classroom was reduced to three hours a day and in some cases reduced to as little as an hour and a half, every other day. Góia said:

“We geared everything down, we placed emphasis mostly on the core and tried to exclude everything else [...]. The teaching was arranged in such a way that we just needed to let go and except that all learning goals would not be met and just work on the basics: math, Icelandic, and social studies in a way, then we just focused on the core and tried our best to make it fun.”

As time progressed, teachers began to further separate what they wanted to emphasize in order to cover as much material as possible in the shortest possible time. Some teachers directed the teaching of Icelandic to the families of students so they could further utilize the time in school for mathematics. However, even if teachers emphasized core subjects they did not seem to engage in specific lesson planning in those core subjects as can be seen in this response from Esther who described the work as follows:

“one is not leaning much on lesson plans or learning goals, one is more just ok what is most important for them to know and then just emphasise the basics that they need to know.”

In Ann's description of the teaching she says, for example, that there was no direct teaching in mathematics and Icelandic, the classes were rather in the form of self-study and the teacher assisted the students in their work.

### **Less academic demand**

The teachers say that in the beginning of this situation academic requirements were upheld but that soon changed as Eva described:

“in the beginning there were stricter academic demands on students, but we decided to back out, because we thought it was a little overwhelming for students, resulting in less academic demand than generally would have been.”

Like Anna described before, there was an emphasis on student's self-study that influenced the way teachers conducted assessment. Eva was unsure about what demands could be placed in assessment and in what form the assessment should be because the message from leadership indicated that assessments should be kept in place despite this new situation.

“They are saying in our school that assessment should be upheld, and that assessment needs to be diverse and well considered because of this situation but at the same time it needs to be demanding. I just question how many demands we can make, and I think it's so unclear and I'm a little unsure of how the assessment should be.”

Her conclusion was to consider the teaching process and offer students individualized assessment.

“I think I will use study partners, try to have class assignments because I feel that there has been so much self-study, so I think I need to consider well the progress of each and every student to see how we form the assessment.”

Since a large part of the study took place at home or online, teachers found it difficult to understand what the basis of the assessment should be and because they did not have "data in hand", they did not feel they had sufficient overview of students' work. Sara commented on this and said:

"We cannot call for any data, we have asked parents to send some of it, just pictures by email, but we cannot collect any data until the school is open and then it just depends on what will be obtainable, we will just assess what comes in and if it is not turned in, well, there is little we can do about that."

It was the experience of all the teachers, that in this situation the mental well-being of the students had priority and less emphasis should be placed on schoolwork and academic demands. Eva said: "I see that many children are a little lost, I am worried about many children and their mental well-being and I think we will have to take special care of those children that feel the worst until next spring" and she continued:

"I am dealing more with how students feel and I experience that students are more often asking me questions that they do not ask at home, that they are experiencing some things at home with their parents working remotely at home and seeing their parents arguing with co-workers, parents losing their jobs... I think they are kind of asking me questions they could possibly ask their parents but I think they are choosing to ask me instead."

The teachers made an effort to nurture students to the best of their ability and felt that their role was first and foremost to take care of students' mental well-being before academic achievement.

### **Professional work and collaboration**

In some cases, teachers felt that their professionalism had been limited by the COVID restrictions. Anna said in this context:

"Naturally, my working conditions have been reduced, I have been put in a box instead of staying in flow. A box that gives me, and my students little wiggle room and we cannot step out of. If I want to step out of the box, there are certain limitations because I must watch out for things, because things have been changed so much that I feel I have less opportunity to do different kind of tasks."

Despite major changes in teachers' working conditions and teachers working remotely from home, the teachers experienced increased and more focused collaboration with peers. Ester said that surprisingly teamwork had continued and actually expanded, because in addition to being in a so-called support team, she worked with more supervising teachers that had sought her out for collaboration on projects for their students. As a result, she was less isolated than she feared.

The teachers all mentioned that the changes that took place would hopefully positively affect their work in the future. Hallur said he hoped that this experience would result in more willingness by teachers to "look away from the textbooks". He said that he felt teachers are too reliant on textbooks while planning lessons because it is convenient to "tick boxes, I am done with this, done with this and done with this". He envisions working more toward the learning goals for individual students: "now you work on this goal and this assignment and then we will see how the student tackles the project. Then you tick the box".

By doing it that way the roles will be reversed, and the students will take increased responsibility for their studies.

Teachers saw that they were able to make vast changes at short notice and similarly, students were able to adapt to changed circumstances. Hallur thought this situation highlighted what is possible to achieve:

“We also need to give credit to students because they are incredibly cool and it's amazing what they can do if they are not spoon-feed the material all the time, you have to be careful to not just tell them, you know... how would you solve this?, what do you mean?, what comes to mind?, think about it ....”

The COVID-19 restrictions therefore caused both students and teachers to step out of a curtain rut that they had been in because they had no other choice.

### **Uncertainty and insecurity**

The teachers all believed that the situation created by COVID-19 had affected their mental well-being in some way. They all put on a brave face but said that they had experienced powerlessness, restlessness, uncertainty, a little fear, restraint, and chaos. In Iceland, teachers were defined as 'essential workers' of the country along with health professionals. Unlike in many countries, compulsory schools were never completely closed, and teachers and students attended school every day with a reduced attendance. Karen elaborated on her experience:

“Of course I was scared [...] in the beginning when we started teaching or when we had to keep going, I thought it was incredibly scary but in retrospect I think it went really well and so, yes, I found it very difficult in the beginning mainly because of the weird atmosphere at school where we all had to stay within our designated area and the kids were also scared [...] so it was just really hard in the beginning.”

At the start of the pandemic, there was a great deal of uncertainty about how and if the virus would affect children and if they could spread the virus. Teachers were not considered a priority group regarding vaccinations. In fact, their priority was ranked number eight out of 10 priority groups. The position of the teachers obviously influenced their well-being at work. Lára described her experience as follows:

“you felt you were put in a situation that you had to walk into whether you wanted to or not and at the time we knew little about whether children could be infectious or you know ... you just found it a little uncomfortable... you know you showed up, but you felt a little uncomfortable... to be put in this position while others had the choice of working from home.”

Elva said that the discussion among teachers was negative at times in the sense that teachers were defined as essential workers but without any protection (vaccination) like healthcare professionals. Olga said:

“I was a little scared sometimes, especially when there was much spread of the virus in the community, I was a little stressed and I made sure I didn't touch books that came from the homes of students in a way, but at the same time I realized that this was also important for society.”

From Olga's words, one can detect a sense of responsibility that many teachers experienced, it was of course very important for society as well as for children that schools remained open. As the time progressed, the teachers said they calmed and became accustomed to this situation. There was a great deal of solidarity among the teachers and emphasis placed on taking good care of themselves and their mental well-being.

## **Discussion**

We will discuss the findings according to three issues that we see as core findings on teachers' professional collaboration and teaching quality.

### **A shift from academic demands to students' well-being**

According to the objectives of the Icelandic general school system, compulsory schools should ensure access to quality education but at the same time meet students' diverse needs (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2012). Schools are academic institutions and academic achievement is one of the main aims of education. The teachers in this study told how they tried to keep up with academic requirements by prioritising core subjects, e.g. mathematics and Icelandic, above other subjects and tried to cover as much material as possible in the shortest possible time. As time passed, the teachers said they shifted the focus from academic demands towards supporting students' mental health and well-being. By doing so teachers prioritised what they thought was most important for students and set aside one of the main aims of education – the academic requirements. Out of the three central 'obligations to students', in teachers' professionalism, teachers mainly emphasised care, placing much less emphasis on the other two obligations, skills and knowledge (Kristinsson, 2013). Beside this, the teachers clearly show another aspect of teacher's professionalism which is respect for others (Aðalbjarnardóttir, 2002). In summary, it seems that teachers strived as much as possible to create a supportive climate and a safe learning environment for their students, which is considered one of the basic dimensions of teaching quality (Klette et al., 2017). This is in line with findings in a new report on pedagogy during the pandemic (Doucet et al., 2020) where it is stated that it is imperative to prioritise safety and well-being before academic demands or as the authors put it: ensuring "Maslow before Bloom".

### **A new challenge led to changed mindset and practices**

In the situation brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, the teachers were all placed in unprecedented circumstances. Among the major changes was the shift from face-to-face interactions with colleagues at their workplace to mostly working remotely from home. Surprisingly they experienced an increased and even more focused collaboration with peers and teamwork that expanded during this period. The teachers in this research thus report actions that can be related to important characteristics of a learning community, such as mutual professional support for teaching and learning, solution-oriented dialogue, and reflection (Svanbjörnsdóttir, 2019). That must be considered a positive indication because even though the number of professionals other than classroom teachers has increased in Icelandic schools, highlighting the need for an active collaboration (Fagráð um símenntun og starfsþróun kennara, 2016), recent research indicates a lack of cooperation between these professionals (Matthíasdóttir et al, 2013).

Both teachers and students were in uncharted territory and teachers noted that despite challenges students were able to adapt to changed circumstances. During the COVID restrictions, prior frameworks used by teachers were largely overlooked and students were given increased freedom as well as more responsibility for their own studies. One teacher pointed out that students were able to do better when the teachers were not spoon-feeding the material to them, and they had to rely on their imagination and creativity instead. These reactions can be related to changes in the role of teachers and students, moving towards the teacher as a guiding supervisor (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021).

### **Impact of insecurity on teaching quality**

All the teachers mentioned how the COVID-19 situation caused a stressful feeling related to uncertainty and insecurity. In the first wave of the pandemic the knowledge regarding the virus and its effect on people's health was still uncertain. Teachers were at the forefront in this battle as by coming to work they created a space for working parents to send their children to school and have some quiet time at home to work. Our findings reveal three types of uncertainty among the teachers; (1) uncertainty regarding the virus itself and how it could affect teachers' health and their loved ones; (2) uncertainty regarding the teaching, how to re-arrange the school day within restricted time and space and which academic content should be prioritised; and (3) uncertainty regarding students' mental health and well-being. As this situation is unprecedented in modern times there is little research to compare with our findings, but it stands to reason that this uncertainty and insecurity experienced by teachers greatly affected various aspects of their teaching quality. According to Damşa et al. (2021) teachers seem to have reacted and made plans to transform their practices to respond to a crisis situation with very limited guidance on what would be best practices in pandemic-related constraints (Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies, 2020). In that sense teachers might have seen quality of teaching differently than before the outbreak of virus. The literature on teaching quality has some ambiguity regarding what constitutes 'quality' but there is consensus among scholars that the teacher is the single largest value-added factor in students' learning (Hanushek et al., 2014; Hattie, 2009; Sanders and Horn, 1998). Therefore, we assume that if teachers are experiencing uncertainty and insecurity every day for a long period, it will affect the level of quality teaching they are able to provide. According to Klette et al. (2017) there is a growing consensus that points to four basic dimensions of teaching quality: clarity of instruction, classroom discourse, cognitive activation, and supportive climate. Our findings indicate that it was challenging for the teachers to keep up the educational demands related to all these dimensions, due to restricted attendance in school buildings, the reduced time teachers had with their students and the sudden shift to remote teaching practises.

### **Conclusion**

In brief, this study contributes to the understanding of teachers' experience and pedagogical decision-making when faced with sudden changes and new challenges. It also gives valuable information regarding what teachers prioritise in their students' education when faced with school closures and restrictions. It was evident that changed practices during the first wave of COVID-19 affected teachers in this study in various ways. Interesting contrasting factors appeared in the data, such as academic demands and some quality factors lowered or getting less attention by teachers but at the same time

teachers reported more engagement in collaboration with colleagues. There were also clear indicators of teachers' professionalism directed at students' well-being above academic factors. One of teachers' obligations towards students is care and teachers in this research study chose to focus their attention on students' well-being, knowing that if students do not feel well, they will struggle with learning. At the same time teachers were clearly dealing with challenges as professionals and finding ways to respond to unknown situation. Despite fear and insecurity some of the teachers managed to be creative and use innovative solutions in their teaching, the challenge, therefore, became an eye-opener regarding some fixed practices. According to the Icelandic Education Act, teachers have a strong obligation towards students, including: "closely monitor learning and their general well-being, guide them in their studies, assist and advises them on personal matters and strengthen communication between the school and students' homes". Our findings clearly show that teachers did exactly this and fulfilled their legal obligations towards students in that sense. Teachers knew that this situation would be temporary, and it would be most important to support students' mental health so they could continue their education when the COVID-19 pandemic subsided.

The qualitative nature of the study gives good insight into the circumstances for teachers at the three participating schools, but the results cannot be generalised to all Icelandic compulsory schools. Data was also only gathered on teachers' experiences so future studies may benefit from triangulating teachers' experiences with those of students and their guardians. Multiple viewpoints could be additional information of value to further understand the challenges related to learning during trying times. The data is also cross-sectional and was gathered at one point, during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, at a time that was a great uncertainty for everyone. Therefore, longitudinal comparison at different time points during and beyond the pandemic would be beneficial.

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