

## NAVIGATING POLYCRISIS: THE ROLE OF SCHOOL PEDAGOGUES IN CROATIA

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### Abstract

In the present era, there is increased awareness that we are navigating a time of *polycrisis*, which refers to the simultaneous interaction of different crises (e.g., the Covid-19 pandemic, war crisis, climate crisis, weakening democracy, inflation, social inequality, etc.). All these issues intertwine, generating instability, complexity, and uncertainty in entirely unpredictable ways (O'Regan, 2023). A state like this notably shapes the dynamics of the education system and all individuals participating in it (educational workers, students, parents, etc.). This research is initiated with the aim of gaining insights into whether schools are prepared, and in what manner, for operating in such complex circumstances and confronting various crisis situations. More precisely, the research is focused on the experiences of school pedagogues, as educational specialists in Croatian schools. The main objective is to examine their experiences in dealing with different crisis situations at schools, as well as their resilience and preparedness for effectively coping with potential crises that may arise in the future. In this paper, the intention is to present the results of the qualitative survey, which aims to examine school pedagogues' experiences regarding their resilience and preparedness in various crisis situations within elementary and secondary schools. This paper aims to present preliminary research findings based on a review of relevant literature in the field and focus groups with school pedagogues. Understanding of this topic can contribute to establishing an empirical foundation for the development of a more resilient educational environment.

**Keywords:** *Croatian educational system, polycrisis, school pedagogues, qualitative study.*

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### 1. Introduction

*Polycrisis* refer to situations where multiple crises occur simultaneously, creating a complex environment of uncertainty. In these situations, the combined impact of these crises is greater than the sum of their individual effects (O'Regan, 2023). The Covid-19 pandemic, wars, the climate crisis, the collapse of cryptocurrency prices, the weakening of democracy, inflation, social inequality, austerity measures, rising energy costs and the global mental health crisis all are deepening society's sense of existential uncertainty (O'Regan, 2023). The European Committee of the Regions (CoR) (2023) emphasizes that we cannot predict which crises will affect Europe, its cities, provinces, and regions in the future, but we can predict that vulnerable groups will suffer the most from the consequences of the crises. This is also confirmed by the opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) (2024), which emphasizes that the climate crisis is expected to have a profound negative impact on all countries and social classes, with a particular focus on vulnerable groups such as women, children, persons of low socioeconomic status, the unemployed, minorities, immigrants, and people with disabilities. It predicts that the realization of their fundamental rights will be seriously jeopardized due to unsuccessful policies at national, European, and global level and that social equality in Europe will be at risk if urgent action is not taken. It also emphasizes that crises do not stop at administrative borders. It is therefore important to cultivate a culture of risk and crisis management and to work on social preparedness in the interests of citizens' safety, health, and well-being (European Economic and Social Committee, 2024). The European Union's role in crisis management should aim to develop a systematic approach to crisis management to increase the resilience of society, enable rapid and flexible responses across different sectors and consider short-term and long-term perspectives in crisis management. Solidarity should be a key principle in crisis management, with a focus on sharing limited resources according to the principles of human dignity and non-discrimination (European Commission et al., 2022). The global Sustainable Development Goals (The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development) also address the above issues and advocate reducing

exposure and vulnerability to extreme climate events and other economic, social, or environmental disasters (United Nations General Assembly, 2015).

In this paper, special attention is paid to the potential of education systems to cope with crisis situations. It is estimated that around 65 million children between the ages of 3 and 15 are directly affected by emergencies and protracted crises worldwide, meaning that they are at risk of lack of protection, disruption of education and displacement, as well as other psychosocial problems (Nicolai et al., 2015). In recent years, interest in researching crisis situations in the education system in the Republic of Croatia has significantly increased, especially during and after the pandemic (e.g., Ristić Dedić & Jokić, 2021; Ćurković et al., 2021; Zovko et al., 2022; Ristić Dedić et al., 2023). In Croatia, coinciding with the outbreak of COVID-19 in March 2020, there were a series of earthquakes that disrupted daily school operations and affected general safety. The Government of the Republic of Croatia recognized the consequences of these crises and adopted the National Recovery and Resilience Plan 2021-2026 (NPOO), which was approved by the European Commission in July 2021. In addition, the Croatian school system was also affected by the Ukraine crisis, as evidenced by the rapid enrolment of Ukrainian students, especially at schools near the Hungarian border. Croatia also felt the repercussions of a mass shooting incident in neighbouring Serbia in May 2023. This event caused fear among students and teachers at all levels.

Regardless of the type or its scope, crisis situations can make it considerably more difficult to achieve educational goals and threaten normal educational processes and the well-being of students. In order to manage the crisis effectively, it is important that experts from different fields, including pedagogues, psychologists and experts in the educational-rehabilitation profile, play a key role in providing immediate measures and support adapted to the specific needs of students and teachers in times of crisis to ensure the continuity of teaching and the well-being of all involved. This study will focus specifically on school pedagogues working in Croatian elementary and secondary schools, exploring their work experience in the context of *polycrisis*.

## **2. Methodology**

### **2.1. Aims of the study**

This study was conducted with the aim of investigating school pedagogues' assessments of their resilience and competence in different crisis situations within the elementary and secondary schools. The specific research questions are as follows: (1) *what a "crisis situation" at school represents for school pedagogues*, (2) *what are the experiences of school pedagogues in dealing with different crisis situations at schools*; and (3) *how school pedagogues assess their resilience and preparedness for effectively coping with crisis situations at schools*. Regarding the defined research questions, a qualitative research approach was chosen and focus groups were conducted with school pedagogues. The main aim of the qualitative analysis was to construct themes and to interpret and discuss the themes in the crisis context presented in the introduction. This study presents the preliminary results of the research.

### **2.2. Sample and procedures**

Five focus-groups were conducted with school pedagogues. In the Croatian school context, a pedagogue is a professional associate who is most commonly employed in formal education institutions (preschools, elementary and secondary schools). His/her role is broadly profiled, but basically involves collaboration with students, teachers and parents in various tasks and forms. Core activities for pedagogues are planning, programming, and evaluating educational work in diverse institutions; organizing and enhancing educational processes; ensuring ongoing improvement of educational quality; etc. (Croatian Qualifications Framework, 2023). The study involved a total of 24 participants, including 21 women and 3 men. Of these, 15 were employed in elementary schools, while 9 worked in secondary schools and/or student dormitories. The schools represented in the study were located in 9 different Croatian counties and differ in terms of size and number of employees and students.

Data collection took place between May and November 2023. Careful attention was paid to ethical procedures when conducting this study. The participants were provided with informed consent for their participation in the study and it was ensured that the anonymity and confidentiality of the data were guaranteed. The results of the focus groups were analyzed in a six-step thematic analysis following the framework outlined by Braun and Clarke (2013). MAXQDA software was used for qualitative data analysis. In this study, selected topics and verbatims of the participants are presented. Verbatims also contain information on gender (F = female, M = male), the type of school where research participants work at (ES = elementary school; SS = secondary school; SD = student dormitory).

### 3. Results

The presentation of the research results follows three defined specific research questions. In the search for an answer to the question of *what a "crisis situation" at school represents for school pedagogues*, the thematic analysis of the focus groups revealed three key themes. When pedagogues talk about crisis situations at school, they most commonly categorize them in these three categories, which differ depending on where the source of the crisis is. Firstly, they recognize crises that occur outside the school but affect the daily life and work of the school (for example: global/national crises such as pandemics, wars, natural disasters (earthquakes, floods). For illustration, here is an example of how a global (war) crisis manifests itself in a school: *"Changes began to happen. Now more and more children are coming, more and more differences are coming, more and more difficulties are coming. We now have a Ukrainian boy who came to the second grade, who has ADHD and does not know the language. (...) He is vulnerable."* (F\_ES). Secondly, there are crises that occur within the school, and which also have a significant impact on the functioning of the school (for example: crises in the school collective such as loss of a teacher or crises in the classroom such as bullying). Below follows the experience of a school pedagogue who talks about the crisis within the school collective: *"In my collective, crisis situations arise when relationships between teachers are severely damaged, and it even happens that colleagues sue each other in court. This is a situation that affects the whole school."* (F\_ES). The third and most common are individual/personal crises, usually affecting a particular student (or their parents) (for example: self-harm, sudden death, serious illness, family violence, conflicts with demanding parents such as threats, verbal conflicts, etc.). In the experience of the participants in this study, the third category is the most common. To illustrate the seriousness of this crisis, two situations are shown: *"It was awful when one of our graduating students died on the day of the school "noriade" (final celebration). He died in a car accident. It was the first terrible situation, a real crisis. It left a deep impact, and every and each passing year we remember it, still asking why and how."* (F\_SS); *"In my former school, I had a situation where a little boy was beaten up - his father rammed his head on the floor. After some of the things the boy told me, it took me two weeks to come to my senses. The things that child said to me are unimaginable things to do as a human being, let alone as a father. (...) Dad ended up in pre-trial detention, from which he was released after two days with a ban on accessing his children. A few months later, I saw them walking around the town."* (M\_ES).

The second question raised in this research is *what are experiences of school pedagogues in dealing with different crisis situations at schools*. Here we looked for descriptions of how pedagogues describe their dealing with crises at school and found two key themes. When analysing the way pedagogues deal with crisis situations and what experiences they have, the first thing that stands out is that in every crisis they consistently focus on the well-being of the children (or the other people most affected by the crisis). Their mission is to ensure that children are safe, healthy, and supported. Here are some examples of their experiences that illustrate this description: *"In any case, when (an emergency situation) arises, we have to adapt to it and we have to be able to keep the basic things, that in the elementary school the children are taken care of, safe and that they can continue playing in some form."* (F\_ES). Secondly, when they reflect on their own role in crisis situations, they will say that crisis situations are extremely emotionally demanding, stressful and exhausting for them, especially for the pedagogues at the beginning of their career (with fewer years of professional experience). To illustrate this, the experience of a pedagogue with less than 5 years of professional experience is shown, who describes a crisis with a student who has serious problems with drug addiction: *"I was very scared, I had never been in such a situation before, and I felt lost because I hadn't learnt about such things at university or anywhere else. This situation needed to be resolved, but I didn't know how to approach these parents. (...) Honestly, I could not sleep at night because of it and it was really awful. (...) These are the situations where I just wonder if I am doing a good job."* (F\_SS). On the other hand, the experiences of pedagogue with more years of professional experience also point to the problem of demanding (emotional) work in crisis situations: *"It's a job where you have to take a certain distance at a certain time, otherwise you burn out."* (M\_ES)

The third question that this research aims to answer is *how school pedagogues assess their resilience and preparedness for effectively coping with crisis situations at schools*. Analysis of focus-groups conducted with school pedagogues in the context of this issue reveals three key themes. First, it is visible that resilience and preparedness for effectively coping with crises grow with experience. According to our research participants: *"Work experience is perhaps even more important than education. Just when they throw you into something, that's when you learn best."* (M\_SD). Second crucial point is that pedagogues feel empowered (resilient and prepared) to deal with crisis situations when they work in an environment where teamwork and collegial support are recognised. According to one participant: *"...it is important for pedagogues to be well, to take care of their mental health and to listen*

to their colleagues. (...) When we meet, we prefer to tell what happened to us, and listen to what happened to someone.” (F\_ES). On the other hand, when there is no such support, pedagogues feel frustrated and overloaded: “I personally feel very overloaded, really, really overloaded. (...) I think we have learnt to deal with different situations and we deal with them as we know and can, but, yes, I am missing..., that's exactly what's missing here, I am missing one or two more people where we can act together.” (F\_SS). In their statements, they also often point out that they lack systematic support in their work. Thirdly, pedagogues feel more resilient and more prepared for navigating crisis when they have the opportunity to learn and improve their knowledge and skills. They often mention the importance of continuous professional development, working on their personal growth and self-improvement (especially in the context of psychotherapeutic work), participating in supervision processes in which they feel empowered and confident to share their experiences. This can be recognized in the following statements of research participants: “Organized supervision and psychotherapy that I personally use and would highly recommend to everyone, reflective meetings at school - maybe there will be some kind of group support.” (F\_ES). There is also recognized need to integrate the topic of crisis management into the initial education of pedagogues. They often point out that they did not have the opportunity to learn about crisis management as part of their formal education, but they believe that this knowledge would be very useful and necessary for them today.

#### 4. Discussion and conclusions

According to the experiences of Croatian school pedagogues, there are three main types of crises that affect schools: external (global) crises such as pandemics or wars, internal school crises such as conflicts between teachers or conflicts in the classroom, and personal crises, especially among vulnerable students. It is important to note that school pedagogues have also recognized that vulnerable groups are particularly affected by crises, which is often discussed in the context of European policy level. This study also examines how pedagogues deal with these crises and finds that they prioritise children's wellbeing and recognise the emotional strain. Their professional experience strengthens their resilience, and a supportive environment helps pedagogues cope with crises. However, many express frustrations at the lack of systematic support and training in crisis management. It is evident that pedagogues have a strong need for ongoing professional development and self-improvement, supervision, peer support and collaboration with their colleagues to share the responsibility in such a difficult situation.

In conclusion, the question arises as to how school pedagogues can successfully navigate through the *polycrisis*, i.e., how effectively they can deal with various challenges and crises that may overlap. In the Croatian education context, this has become particularly visible in recent years, as schools have had to work effectively under the conditions of a pandemic, earthquakes, the consequences of the refugee crisis and general uncertainty at the same time. Part of the answer to this question certainly lies in continuous professional development. Ongoing professional development is crucial to enable school pedagogues (and other educational workers as well) to recognise signs of trauma, provide support to students and teachers and take appropriate action during and after crises. In addition, it is important to raise awareness of the demands placed on school pedagogues and to recognise the emotional strain and potential for professional burnout and provide appropriate support. Maximising opportunities for pedagogues to engage in supervision processes and collaborative teamwork in multidisciplinary environments can significantly enhance their potential to successfully deal with crises. Overall, it can be concluded that greater attention must be paid to crisis management. It is also necessary to carry out systematic monitoring and research to understand the impact of crisis situations on the individual as well as on the education system in general.

At the end, given the qualitative nature of the research and the preliminary results presented, it is important to recognize some limitations of this study. This study was conducted in the Croatian educational context, so the transferability of the results to other settings or contexts may be limited. Furthermore, since this study provides a first insight into the results, no analyses were conducted to identify differences in participants' experiences in terms of the length of their professional experience in school, or the type of school at which they are employed. The preliminary nature of the findings implies that further research and analyses may uncover additional layers of themes and complexities that are not recognized by this study. Despite the recognised limitations, the findings of this research can contribute to the discussion on how to create a more resilient educational environment that is better equipped to cope with and respond effectively to crises that we may face in the future.

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