ATTITUDES OF SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS TOWARDS TEACHING STYLES BEFORE AND DURING THE COVID–19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract/Izvleček

The aim of this paper was to examine students' attitudes towards teaching styles before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Mean values were calculated using descriptive statistics, and the T-test for independent samples was used to determine the existence of statistically significant differences between groups. After testing the difference in student assessment of the teachers' style in two different school years, no statistically significant difference was found, potentially owing to student adaptation to the situation. A positive- sign correlation coefficient between the democratic and laissez-faire styles was recorded at a significance level of $p<0.05$.

Odnos srednješolcev do stilov učiteljev pred in med pandemijo Covid-19

Namen tega prispevka je bil preučiti stališča učencev do stilov njihovih učiteljev pred in med pandemijo Covid-19. Srednje vrednosti smo izračunali z uporabo deskriptivne statistike, za ugotavljanje obstoja statistično značilnih razlik med skupinami pa smo uporabili t-test za neodvisne vzorce. S testiranjem razlike v oceni učencev o učiteljevem slogu v dveh različnih šolskih letih ni bilo ugotovljene statistično pomembne razlike zaradi morebitne prilagoditve učenca situaciji. Korelacijski koeficient pozitivnega predznaka med demokratičnim in stilom 'laissez-faire' je bil zabeležen na stopnji pomembnosti $p < 0,05$.

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Introduction

In March 2020, owing to the threat of the COVID-19 pandemic, a decision was made to close schools around the world (OECD and World Bank, 2020). According to research (Jokić, Begić et al. (2020), the COVID-19 pandemic caused major changes in the work habits and daily activities of individuals. The teaching process changed completely because it switched to alternative online learning methods (Tonković, Pongračić and Vrsalović, 2020). Although the educational system was prepared for online learning, and the Internet had been accepted as a useful source of information, the new situation led to numerous difficulties. According to (Tonković, Pongračić and Vrsalović, 2020. p. 122), the OECD & World Bank (2020), point out that only 20% of countries affected by the pandemic had the means for online learning because no country had a universal digital curriculum. Teachers offer online classes but often with little success because they are deprived of social contact with students. Among the disadvantages of online classes, students cite frequent misunderstanding of tasks, and the impossibility and unavailability of teacher explanations, which lead to weaker results for students. The teacher's clarification of arising ambiguities in the teaching process and his quick intervention improves cooperation and communication in the class (Runtić and Kevelj, 2020). Jurčević Lozančić and Kudek Mirošević (2021) criticize the positive attitude towards online education, because they emphasize the importance of educators, teachers in this process as creators of a stimulating environment. In the newly created situation, teachers apply different teaching methods to achieve maximum success and maintain student interest in classes. The authors emphasize the importance of the socio-emotional aspect in the learning process, which is necessary to create the sense of comfort that is lost without classroom instruction.

Škutor (2016, p. 703) highlights the teacher as the creator of the socio-emotional aspect of teaching, whose role and style change through this process. Pongračič (2019) emphasizes the importance of communication and strengthening the communication competences that lead teachers to quality teaching. In teaching work (according to Lujić, 2019, p. 130; Breka and Petravić, 2015; Šenjug-Golub, Rajić and Dumančić, 2020), they assign priority to competences and teaching styles. The teacher's style of teaching and classroom management stands out as an important part of a positive classroom climate.

As Škutor (2016, p. 703) points out, all these factors are united by the same purpose: creating better conditions for learning and teaching. According to Waheed, Hussin and Daud, 2018, the teacher's style affects the level of motivation and job satisfaction and creates a pleasant environment in the classroom. Almost all school factors depend on leadership, that is, the styles that teachers adopt and prefer and that influence educational outcomes, he claims (Urick, 2016).

There are numerous definitions of teaching styles, and these are most often associated with the teacher's dominant, specific, and relatively permanent behaviour towards students. A teacher's style guides and directs his way of learning and has a strong effect on students' ability to learn and absorb information (Pongračić, 2019, p. 88). Both authors analyse and categorize teaching styles in a similar way and highlight their characteristics. The first style is the *authoritarian/autocratic style*, characterized by ordering, criticizing, and lack of warmth and feeling, without respect for the child's opinion and individuality. The second style is the *permissive/laissez-faire style*; this is the opposite of the *authoritarian style* and is characterized by warmth and acceptance, but also by the absence of boundaries, and by indulgence because the child is left to himself and to make decisions for which he lacks strength, psychophysical and emotional maturity. The third style is the *authoritative/democratic style,* where the teacher sets boundaries, while respecting the autonomy and individuality of students (Pongračič, 2019, p. 89). Many authors "classify the relationship between students and teachers as personal and professional-social and consider the teacher responsible for the educational success and failure of students" (Dobrotina and Erokhina 2016; Varga, 2015, according to Posavec and Vlah, 2019, p. 58). The teacher is the initiator and motivator of cooperation, appreciation and understanding among students. The teacher-student relationship by its nature is defined as professional-social because it contains a clear goal and intention that presupposes objectivity in these relationships. The opinion of students about the teacher and vice versa are important factors in the quality of the teaching process (Brust Nemet 2018).

Runtić and Kavelj (2020) conducted a survey in Croatia on student opinions about distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. The students cited as disadvantages of this type of teaching: too many assigned tasks, difficulty in sharing teaching content, lack of understanding and explanation by individual teachers, and the inability to socialize with friends. They cite interesting and fun classes with the use of digital quizzes as an advantage.

The level of teacher competences, and leadership style are both crucial for distance learning and effective use of information and communication technology. Students expect the teacher to guide, direct, motivate and help them with obstacles. Distance learning can be difficult because of its inaccessibility for students with lower financial status (Huang et al. 2020). Mungroo's (2020) research on student opinions about teachers and their styles suggests adaptive coping strategies and teacher leadership styles that can facilitate the implementation and realization of set teaching goals for the mutual benefit of students and teachers. Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond (2017) point out that teachers who work in circumstances that negatively affect their well-being have a negative effect on student achievement. A study conducted in South Africa focusing on education adaptation during COVID-19 (Mhlanga and Moloi, 2020; Mahaye, 2020) contributes to the debate on understanding teacher leadership styles needed during crisis situations. According to these results, their teachers' new online teaching strategies were effective and helped students with teaching and learning challenges and did not significantly affect their academic results. The results of this study show that during the COVID-19 pandemic, only one percent of students showed a slight decline in academic performance. Under such circumstances, Huang et al. (2020), and Runtić and Kavelj (2020, p. 152) emphasize the importance of applying a flexible, student-centred pedagogy that offers a choice of time and place of learning, means for teaching and learning, approaches to teaching, and learning activities, while also offering support for both teachers and students.

The purpose of this paper is to examine student attitudes towards teaching styles before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, in two different school years.

Methodology

Aim and subject of research: The aim of the research was to establish student attitudes about the teaching styles of their teachers before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. The subject of the research is the assessment of the teacher's style from the perspective of high school students before and during the COVID-19 pandemic Research *questions* 1. What are the attitudes of high school students towards the teaching styles of their teachers before and during the COVID-19 pandemic? 2. Do high school students' attitudes towards the teaching styles of their teachers before the COVID-19 pandemic differ by gender? *Participants and research procedure:*

The research sample conducted in the 2018/2019 school year consisted of 400 high school students of both sexes, 148 male and 252 female. The research sample conducted in the 2020/2021 school year consisted of 400 respondents of both sexes, 137 male and 263 female. The study was carried out with the consent of the competent authorities, that is, the principals of the relevant high schools. It is important to point out that the sample consisted only of adult students, more precisely those from the third and fourth years; therefore, the consent of their parents and guardians was not required. The students voluntarily participated in the research, which was anonymous. The first part of the study was conducted in the 2018/2019 school year, and the second part was conducted in 2020/2021, the school year in three Mostar schools with the consent and agreement of the competent persons in the schools. Both studies were carried out during a classroom lesson, and before the study itself, the researcher instructed the participants in how to fill out the given instrument. *Instrument*: For the purposes of the research, an assessment scale was constructed for high school students with the aim of examining their attitudes towards the teachers at the school they attended before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. The measurement instrument consists of 30 variables in the form of statements that treat the characteristics and attitudes of teachers towards students before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. The variables are qualitatively described, and the respondents' answers are quantified according to a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 to 5. (1 = I completely disagree; 2 = I mostly disagree; 3 = I neither agree nor strongly disagree; 4 = mostly agree; 5 = completely agree). The Cronbach alpha of the scale of assessment of teaching styles by students is 0.929, which represents an extremely high internal consistency of the measuring instrument. Statements from the questionnaire were divided into three groups, i.e., the three teacher styles of leading and managing the class and students.

1. Negative attitude towards students and class management style (authoritarian, autocratic style, demanding, criticizing style, without respect for other people's opinions and emotions, negative judgments, uses and emphasizes one's power): 1. The teachers are strict; 2. Teachers give us orders; 3. Teachers punish us (with extra homework, tests, etc.); 4. Teachers criticize us; 5. Teachers emphasize that they have power and behave like bosses; 6. Teachers put pressure on us; 7. Teachers call us derogatory names; 8. Teachers have harsh voices; 9. Teachers sneer or make faces when students say something.

2. Positive qualities of teachers in their leadership style (democratic leadership style, support, guidance, understanding of students): 1. Teachers accept our opinions; 2. The teachers care about my interests; 3. We can turn to teachers for help; 4. Teachers are fair to all students; 5. Teachers point out positive things in students, not just mistakes; 6. Teachers are actively involved in lessons and class activities; 7. Teachers cooperate with us in class; 8. Teachers try their best in class; 9. Teachers praise and encourage us;10. Teachers speak intelligibly; 11. Teachers address us with respect; 12. Teachers use humour in class; 13. Teachers listen to students when they tell them something; 14. The teacher's body language indicates that he is relaxed and open; 15. Teachers look us in the eye when they talk to us; 16. Teachers often smile and are in a good mood in class; 17. Teachers prepare well for class.

3. The teacher's lack of interest in the students (laissez-faire style of class management, avoiding conflicts, permissiveness, class management without goals and rules, without discipline): 1. It is not important for teachers what the students do in class; it is more important for them to hold a lecture on a certain teaching topic; 2. Teachers don't understand; 3. It seems to me that the teachers are not interested in the students or the teaching; 4. With teachers, there are no rules that we have to follow.

Table 1. Representation of respondents by gender in the 2018/2019 and 2020/2021 school year.

Gender	Sample 2018/2019	Sample 2020/2021
Male	148	137
Female	252	263
In total	400	400

Results

The results were first analysed using descriptive statistics with calculation of the mean value. The percentages were calculated, and a tabular presentation was given along with the analysis of percentages of representation. The T-test for independent samples was used to examine the existence of a statistically significant difference between groups. Statistical significance was established at the $p < 0.05$ level.

The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) statistical program version 22.0 was used for data processing. Our first task was to investigate and determine how respondents of both sexes evaluated the different teaching styles of their teachers. We performed this task by analysing the research results with the assessment scale, and we presented and clarified these in tables. As part of the same task, we investigated whether there was a statistically significant difference in the assessment by respondents from the 2018/2019 school year and the year 2020/2021 on this issue. We performed that part using the T-test for two independent samples.

Table 2. Student assessment of the styles preferred by teachers in 2018/2019. and 2020/2021

Teaching styles	I completely disagree	I mostly disagree	I neither agree nor disagree	I mostly agree	I comple tely agree	Arith. mean
Autocratic style 2018/2019	37,13	29,27	23,31	6,10	4,03	2,09
Autocratic style 2020/2021	41,62	26,88	21,04	10,31	3,93	2,04
Laissez-faire style 2018/2019	40,90	38,98	12,65	4,65	2,73	1,89
Laissez-faire style 2020/2021	38,83	26,38	20,375	6,62	7,82	2,19
Democratic style 2018/2019	5,09	6,74	22,92	31,90	33,27	3,81
Democratic style 2020/2021	9,32	11,49	25,47	25,27	28,49	3,52

Table 2 shows the percentage results for student assessment of three teaching styles in research conducted in the 2018/2019 school year and in 2020/2021. The evaluation scale used in the study was constructed in such a way that the answers 'Completely agree' and 'Mostly agree' indicate a high level of the presence of a certain style among teachers. On the other hand, the answers 'Completely disagree' and 'Mostly disagree' express the assessment that teachers rarely or never use this style of leading and managing the class and students, while the answer 'Neither agree nor disagree' expresses indecision among students in relation to the statements. From the results for both school years, it is notable that students have a negative attitude towards the laissez-faire style: 2018/2019, AM =1.89; 2020/2021, AM= 2.19. Respondents also have a slightly negative attitude towards the autoocratic style: 2018/2019 AM = 2.09; 2020/2021, AM = 2.04. Table 2 shows that students have a positive attitude towards the democratic style, as they rated that style highly in both school years: 2018/2019, AM = 3.81; 2020/2021, AM = 3.52. It can be concluded that for students at these schools, the most desirable teaching style is the democratic style, which provides them with the best possible conditions for learning and

teaching. Ahmed, Khan Farooqi and Iqbal (2021) investigated student evaluations of five teaching styles. According to the results, the style of the teacher who is a role model was rated the best, followed by the style of formal authority, then the style of leadership, then the style of delegation, and the worst rated was the professional style. It seems that students want to have a teacher as a role model, while his expertise is less important. Bohren (2019) emphasizes student-centred teaching, where the teacher remains a guide and mentor, providing the student with a sense of freedom and independence. Arithmetic means for student assessment of all three styles of leadership and management of the class and students in the study conducted in the 2018/2019 and 2020/2021 school years are shown in Graph 1.
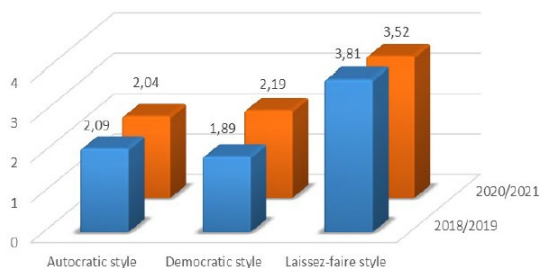
Graph 1. Comparative presentation of student assessment of teachers' leadership styles

Table 3. Testing the differences in arithmetic means of the evaluation of teacher leadership style before and during the COVID-19 pandemic

School year	N	Arith. mean	t	df	p
2018/2019	400	3.04	1.566	29	0.128
2020/2021	400	2.90			

Looking at Table 3, which tests the difference in the assessment of teacher leadership style by students in two different school years, before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is evident that no statistically significant difference was found. The value obtained by examining the arithmetic means t = 1.566 at the level of significance p = 0.128 tells us that there is no statistically significant difference in the assessment of teacher leadership style by students in two different school years. These results were not expected because it was assumed that, given the extraordinary conditions in the teaching process, student evaluation of teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic would be lower compared to the evaluation for the 2018/2019 school year. It is possible that students had adapted to the current situation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, so this is one reason for the absence of a statistically significant difference before and during the pandemic. Kwatubana and Molaodi (2021), analysing recent literature on the topic of teachers' well-being in crisis situations, point out the two best leadership practices, which are distributed and compassionate leadership. In the following, we sought to examine whether there are statistically significant differences in student assessment of the teacher's leadership style in relation to gender.

Table 4. Testing differences in the arithmetic means of the assessment of teacher leadership style before and during the COVID-19 pandemic by gender

School year	N	Arith. mean	t	p
Male 2018/2019	148	3.037	-0.221	0.826
Female 2018/2019	252	3.048		
Male 2020/2021	137	2.958	1.584	0.124
Female 2020/2021	263	2.863		

Looking at Table 4, which tests the difference in assessments of the teacher's leadership style by students in two separate school years, before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, in relation to gender, there is no statistically significant difference found in either year.
The values obtained by testing arithmetic means amount to t = -0.221 at the level of significance p = 0.826 for the school year 2018/2019 and t = 1.584 at the significance level p = 0.124 for the school year 2020/2021.

These results of the T-test tell us that there is no statistically significant difference in the assessment by students of teacher leadership style in two different school years in relation to gender. These results were not expected, as it was assumed that there would have been major changes in teacher leadership styles before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the new situation and the negative consequences for the education system, the results indicate the professional attitude of teachers towards their students and the profession. The research participants, 400 high school students, mostly respect and appreciate the efforts of their professors to maintain the quality of teaching. To determine the existence or non-existence of a connection between the leadership and classroom management styles of teachers and student results ad its meaning, we will subject the results to the procedure of establishing correlation and mutual connection. The results of the correlation analysis between the measuring instruments at a level of significance from 0.01 to 0.05 are presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Correlation coefficients for the assessment of teacher leadership styles

	Autocratic style	Democratic style	Laissez-faire style
Autocratic style	1	-0.488*	-0.699**
Democratic style		1	0.728**
Laissez-faire style			1

** Correlation significant at the 0.01 level (two-way).
* Correlation significant at the 0.05 level (two-way).

These correlation coefficients indicate the relationship between teacher leadership styles and leadership styles to determine the existence or non-existence of a relationship and its significance between autocratic, democratic, and laissez-faire leadership styles. Table 5 shows that the observed styles achieve a statistically significant linear correlation of both positive and negative signs at the 0.05 level. The strength of the connection between individual researched areas varies throughout the measurement space. Table 5 shows that the highest correlation coefficient with a positive sign is recorded by the democratic and laissez-faire styles, where the correlation coefficient is $r = 0.728$ at the significance level of $p<0.05$. It is to be expected that these two styles would be highly positively correlated.

The next highest correlation coefficient, with a negative sign, is between the autocratic and laissez-faire styles, where the correlation coefficient is r = -0.699 at the significance level of p<0.05; it is again to be expected that the more laissez-faire style would be present in education - the autocratic style is less common in educational institutions. Statistically significant connections of weaker intensity at the p<0.01 significance level are recorded between the autocratic and democratic styles, where the correlation coefficient is r = -0.488. Similar results were obtained by Abdur, Roohul and Shabir (2019), where a high correlation was found between different teacher leadership styles and class and student management.

Discussion

According to the results giving student assessment of teachers who prefer the autocratic style in 2018/2019, the arithmetic mean of this teaching style ranges from 1.61 to 2.65. From the student assessment of the quality of teachers who prefer the laissez-faire style in 2018/2019, it is noticeable that the arithmetic mean for this teaching style ranges from 1.68 to 2.10. From the student assessment of the quality of teachers who prefer the democratic style in 2018/2019, it is noticeable that the arithmetic mean for student ratings of this teaching style ranges from 3.11 to 4.27. From all the above, it is evident that teachers in the 2018/2019 school year, according to student evaluation, preferred the democratic style the most, as evident in the percentages for student assessment of the autocratic style of leading and managing the class and students in the research conducted in the 2020/2021 school year. years. it is evident from the results that the arithmetic mean of the student assessment of this teaching style ranges from 1.63 to 2.86. From the presented percentages of student assessment of the laissez-faire style of leading and managing the class and students, it is evident that the arithmetic mean of student assessments of this teaching style ranges from 1.94 to 2.47. From these results on student evaluation of the democratic style of leadership and management of the class and students, it is noticeable that the arithmetic mean for student evaluation of this teaching style ranges from 3.12 to 4.04. Observing the results obtained by testing the difference in the assessment of the teacher's leadership style by students in two separate school years, before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, no statistically significant difference was found.

The value obtained by examining the arithmetic means t = 1.566 at the level of significance p = 0.128 tells us that there is no statistically significant difference in the assessment of the teacher's leadership style by students in two different school years. The above results of the T-test tell us that there is no statistically significant difference in the evaluation of the teacher's leadership style by the students, even in relation to the gender of the students in two different school years before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. The values obtained by testing arithmetic means amount to t = -0.221 at the level of significance p = 0.826 for the school year 2018/2019, and t = 1.584 at the significance level p = 0.124 for the school year 2020/2021. The observed styles achieve a statistically significant linear correlation of both positive and negative signs at the 0.05 level. The strength of the connection between individual researched areas varies across the measurement space. The highest correlation coefficient with a positive sign is recorded for the democratic and laissez-faire styles, where the correlation coefficient is r = 0.728 at the significance level of p<0.05. It is to be expected that these two styles be highly positively correlated. The next highest correlation coefficient, with a negative sign, occurs between the autocratic and laissez-faire styles, where the correlation coefficient is r = -0.699 at the level of significance p<0.05, which is again to be expected, since the more the laissez-faire style is present in educational institutions, the less representation there is of the autocratic style. Statistically significant connections of weaker intensity at the p<0.01 significance level are recorded between the autocratic and democratic styles, where the correlation coefficient is r = -0.488. Research by Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond (2017) indicates that the negative effect of crisis situations can be disastrous for the teaching profession because of the continuous effects of stress. Therefore, teachers may permanently leave their profession because they feel unable to respond to new challenges in the teaching process. Owing to the digital transformation of education during the COVID-19 pandemic, Mahaye (2020), Mhlanga and Moloi (2020), and Mungroo (2020) suggest strategies for teachers in the form of self-help to mitigate the negative effect on their way of leading and teaching. In the case of remote teaching, teachers are unsure of their leadership style and therefore need the support and empathy of students and their superiors, as Sokal, Trudel and Babb (2020) point out.

The authors suggest providing appropriate help and support to teachers Berjaoui and Karami-Akkary (2019) point out that compassionate leadership is key in mitigating the effects of stress and emphasize a culture of cooperation among teachers so that the process of distance learning and teaching remains effective and purposeful. This study has both limitations and advantages. First, when conducting the second part of the study, specifically during the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a fear of potential infection. The restrictions also refer to the availability of the participants who made up the sample in the school year before the COVID-19 pandemic. Although classes in Mostar schools at that time took place almost according to the established schedule, there were absences of respondents/high school students because of quarantine. Some professors were also absent because of infection or maternity leave. The change in teachers of certain subjects affected the students' assessment of the teacher's styles, but in general the students could give a realistic assessment of the same. Therefore, this paper makes a modest contribution to research on this topic and leaves room for more extensive research.

Conclusion

This study examined and compared students' attitudes towards the styles of their teachers before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the results, the most common teacher style is the democratic one, followed by the laissez-faire style, and the least represented is the autocratic style. During the final survey, which took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, in the 2020/2021 school year, negative attitudes towards teachers' styles were expected; however, this was not reflected in the results.

Based on the results, it is clear that these teachers engaged in online classes were ready, despite the lack of social contact with students, to respond to challenges and demanding tasks. Through daily activities and tasks, the teaching profession acquires a new dimension and purpose, and the teacher becomes an adaptive and reflective practitioner. The contribution of this paper draws attention to the lack of other research on this issue in Bosnia and Herzegovina and leaves room for future research.

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