# THE INFLUENCE OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON CHANGES IN THE ROLES OF SCHOOL MANAGERS IN REGIONAL EDUCATION

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Abstract:
The study examines the content of the roles of managers in regional education and the possible impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on changes in these roles. The respondents of the research survey, the methodology of which is presented in the introductory part of the study, were managers and other employees of regional education in various roles of actors in the educational process. The investigation took place within the framework of qualitative research design. The aim of the survey was to update the contents of key roles of managers in regional education and to determine whether the COVID-19 pandemic also changed the importance that respondents attribute to certain types of roles or partial activities of managers in regional education. In the theoretically conceived chapter 1, selected concepts of the roles of managers, known in the domestic context in theories of management and school management, are first introduced. Chapter 1 also specifies the content of the roles of manager for the model created by Plamínek & Fišer (2005), as they were presented in the works of theorists of management. The mentioned model was also used for data collection within the research survey. This means for determining the specific content of these roles and any changes in their meaning that occurred during the period under review. The influence in the period from March 2020 to January 2021 was reflected. The obtained information is presented and the results of the survey are interpreted in chapter 2 of the paper and in its final part. Here, the text deals with changes in the content and importance of such defined sub-roles mentioned by the informants and relevant for the period of changes that the COVID-19 pandemic brought to the segments of regional education. The basic method of the research survey was an analysis of written records of the roles of school leaders (principals) prepared by individual respondents. Questioning and the study of documents in the preparatory phase of the research survey were used as an additional methods.

## Introduction (aim and research methods)

In the spring of 2020, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, there was an unprecedented change in the organization and, in part, in the content and goals of education. In schools (here within regional education), their principals had to change not only the organizational form and modify teaching methods at the level of the whole school, but also to manage crisis management and the remote management and leadership of other school employees. However, this completely new situation did not end in the school year 2019/2020, when distance learning was considered to be rather temporary and there were also some adjustments in the school attendance obligation. On the contrary, it continues during the current school year, with the assumption of the return of children, pupils and students to schools whenever the epidemic

situation and political decisions at the level of the entire state or sub-regions of the Czech Republic allow. The increased level of decision-making under conditions of risk and uncertainty thus continues, and at the same time distance, preferably synchronous, but also asynchronous online learning is the basic form of education (for more information see Boudová et al, 2021).

It can be reasonably assumed that the situation changes not only in individual schools, but in the whole regional education, that pedagogical and non-pedagogical staff respond to it and at the same time expect to manage the outlined complex situation by school leaders. Let us also remember that the school managers are also representatives of their organization externally, towards the founder, parents and often the general public. At the same time, representatives of associations of school principals also suggest possible solutions in relation to the entire educational system (esp. formal education) and thus act as representatives of institutionalized initial education, which is the subject of intensive public debate. Requirements for school principals can thus be described, among other options, in terms of managing their roles, which are related to their job position, or their roles within various (currently also virtual) teams in the school.

The aim of the research survey presented below was to update the contents of the roles of school principals (from kindergartens to secondary schools) and also capture the changes that occurred in these roles of headmasters in connection with the overall epidemic situation and its development from March 2020 to the end of January 2021. The research survey therefore no longer covers further unfavorable developments, which were reflected from February 2021.

The survey was carried out within the framework of qualitative research design and its intention was to find out what is the current content of partial roles of regional education managers and how these roles and the content of the roles were affected by the pandemic situation due to COVID-19. Two research questions were asked:
RQ1: What is the current content of the roles of leading pedagogical staff (school principals)?
RQ2: What changes are taking place in the roles of school principals in connection with a pandemic situation (COVID-19)?

The basic method used in data collection was written records of the content of partial roles of school principals created by individual respondents (n = 45) and analysis of the information thus obtained. As an additional method, questioning was used (individual, through the digital teaching and communication platform MS Teams). Given the methodology used, the results of the survey will not be statistically evaluated and generalized.

The respondents of the research survey were managers and other employees of regional education in various roles of actors in the educational process with at least theoretical knowledge in the field of school management. A group of respondents, forming a research sample, is currently preparing for the performance of managerial positions in formal education at the university. The choice of respondents was therefore intentional in this case (intentional selection of the research sample).

Respondents were instructed to use the model of managerial roles developed by Plamínek & Fišer (2005) to determine the content of managerial roles of school principals. The roles of the manager, corresponding to the division according to the Plamínek & Fišer model (see also Chapter 1), were presented to the respondents in an introductory online discussion. For the research survey, Plamínek & Fišer overview of the roles of a manager was chosen as the model

most frequently mentioned in the theory of school, known among the professional pedagogical public and used in publications of authors in management and leadership outside the education system (e. g. Pilařová, 2016).

## 1. Selected models of managerial and team roles and their application in regional education[1]

The role of managers has been one of the areas covered by management theory since the 1970s. H. Mintzberg was the first to describe managerial roles (Vodáček & Vodáčková, 2013). The concept of role in this typology of managerial roles basically corresponds to the definition of role in the socio-psychological concept (for example, Štikar et al, 2003). The role of a manager is the set of expected behavior of the holder corresponding to the job position of the manager. The role of each manager can be divided into several types, each of which is part of the general role of a manager, and defined as *"a set of activities that an individual performs in accordance with the role"* (Pilařová, 2016, p.7). Where we talk about the content of roles in this text, we mean just such a definition of roles by a set of activities.

Also within school management as an applied scientific discipline, various models of the roles of managers are used and the application of these concepts is focused primarily on the roles of school principals. In the Czech environment, the most well-known model of the role of school principals is probably the modification of the typology created by Plamínek & Fišer (2005), originally not specified for school management. The general role of a manager (employee in a leading job position) is divided into: the role of a manager, the role of a leader and the role of a process executor (ibid, see also Pilařová, 2016, pp. 20-21). According to theorists of school management, the above division of a complex managerial role is typical for management in regional education (Slavíková, 2008, Trojanová, 2017, etc.).

Slavíková (2008) believes that the role of the executor is connected primarily with the formal organization of the school (with its organizational structure), and even argues that in a school as a learning organization it does not have to be performed by the principal. At present, however, the school principal also remains a teacher and as such is the executor of the pedagogical process (Trojanová, 2017). The role of the manager can be considered as a basic role of managers in regional education. In its usual characteristics, it results from the formal authority of the principal/head teacher, which is derived from his/her position at the top of the organizational structure and is associated with the ability to make decisions and be responsible for the decisions taken. In this role, the school principal primarily ensures the stability of the organization through proper decesion making process, in which s/he uses his/her managerial competencies and relies on his/her positional authority. In the role of the leader, the school principal achieves good results and goals of the organization through effective leadership of other staff and as a leader of the pedagogical process participates in achieving the basic goal of the school as an institution and a specific organization that provides public service.

In practice, it is difficult to completely distinguish between the roles of manager and leader. However, at the same time, the characteristics of the manager are still defined, usually in contradiction with the expectations of the leader (see Table 1).

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[1] A text of this chapter is based also on previously published texts by the author.

**Table 1:** *Differences in the role of the school principal as a leader and a manager*

| LEADER | MANAGER |
|---|---|
| Introduces changes and develops new procedures | Continuously performs administrative activities |
| Encourages the status quo to be maintained | Accepts the status quo |
| Focuses his attention on the human factor | Focuses attention on the functioning of the system |
| Solves things with a long-term perspective | Solves current issues |
| Does not deal with details | Deals with details |
| Creates a positive atmosphere | Relies on control |
| Asks *what and why* | Asks *how and when* |
| Sometimes changes the rules | Always follows the rules |
| Shows the direction, the vision | Plans and processes the budget |
| Unites and inspires employees | Names and solves problems |
| Motivates employees | Organizes and staffs |

*Source: Slavíková (2008, p. 43)*

For the purposes of this study, we can state that it is really necessary for school principals to acquire and at the right time to be able to use the competencies necessary to manage both of these roles. At the same time, we cannot forget the role of the administrator and executor of the process.

Concept of a role in the theory and practice of (school) management also appears in connection with team role. By this we mean the tendency of an individual to behave in a certain way within a team, respond to other team members (relationship roles) and contribute to achieving performance goals in the team and for the team (performance roles) (Bělohlávek, Košťan & Šuleř, 2001). According to Bělohlávek (2008, p. 29) *"the team role is thus a kind of result of connecting the personality with the requirements of the situation"*.

Although the work and team roles are not interchangeable, it is certainly not without interest that also in the probably best-known division of team roles, authored by M. Belbin, the role of "coordinator" is mentioned, defined here as *"needed to focus on the team's objectives, draw out team members and delegate work appropriately"* (The Nine Belbin Team Roles, online). The overview of team roles according to Plamínek also includes nine roles. The central position among them is occupied by the role of a leader (strategist), which is characterized by the ability to combine rational and strategic thinking with empathy and intuition, mostly a charismatic person (Plamínek, 2009, p. 47). The team roles of coordinator and leader (strategist) can be played in the team by their formal leaders. Therefore, especially these roles can be a complement to managerial roles. Likewise, the formal leader (in our case, the school principal) can play other team roles as a team member.

## 2. Data collection and research results

The aim of the survey was to update the contents of key roles of managers in regional education and to determine whether the COVID-19 pandemic also changed the importance that

respondents attribute to certain types of roles or partial activities of managers in regional education.

The research survey took place from December 2020 (introductory online presentation of assignments and discussions on a selected overview of management roles, beginning of data collection in electronic form of written record of respondents' statements) to early February 2021 (end of individually conducted online interviews with respondents, analysis and interpretation of research results).

When evaluating the respondents' answers (n = 45) to RQ1 (*What is the current content of the roles of leading pedagogical staff /school principals/?*) it is possible to define the following updated content of (activities within) sub-roles of school managers / principals:
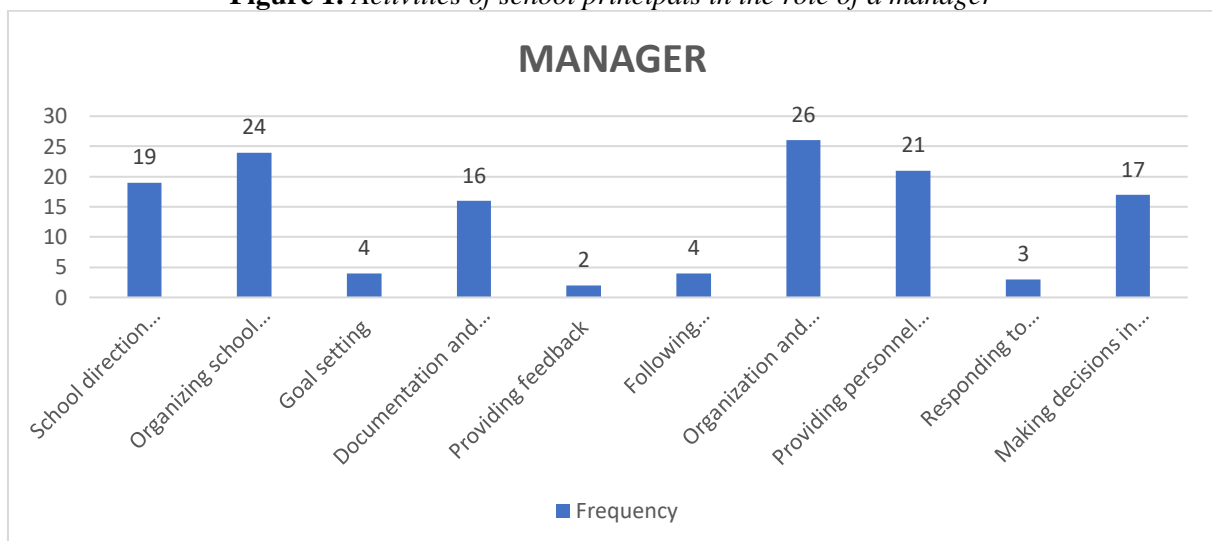a) role of a manager – school direction and budget planning; organizing school activities and staff; goal setting; documentation and security control; providing feedback; following regulations and recommendations; organization and staff development; providing personnel management activities; responding to change; making decisions in critical situations and eliminating negatives,
b) role of a leader – having the ability to influence others; giving and delegating tasks; introducing changes; communicating and providing feedback; combining skills and managing conflicts; being capable of lead a team; knowing and understanding current events; motivating and supporting; setting and pursuing goals (vision),
c) the role of a process executor – providing pedagogical and educational activities; supporting pupils and teachers; providing resources; controlling and influencing mood; reaching goals; solving emergencies and sending out documents; fulfilling other roles and ensuring the running of the school.

The results included answers that matched at least 2 of the total number of 45 respondents. The frequency of respondents' answers according to the content of individual roles is also shown graphically (see Figures 1-3). In this part of the research survey, all 45 respondents answered, but not all stated the content (key activities) for each sub-role.

**Figure 1:** *Activities of school principals in the role of a manager*

**Figure 2:** *Activities of school principals in the role of a leader*



**LEADER**

Bar chart values:
- Having the ability to...: 11
- Giving and delegating tasks: 14
- Introducing changes: 2
- Communicating and...: 20
- Combining skills and...: 5
- Being capable to lead a team: 13
- Knowing and understanding...: 2
- Motivating and supporting: 15
- Setting and pursuing goals...: 18

*Source: own processing*

**Figure 3:** *Activities of school principals in the role of process executor*



**PROCESS EXECUTOR**

Bar chart values:
- Providing pedagogical and educational activities: 24
- Supporting pupils and teachers: 5
- Providing resources: 6
- Controling and influencing mood: 4
- Reaching goals: 4
- Solving emergencies and sending out documents: 5
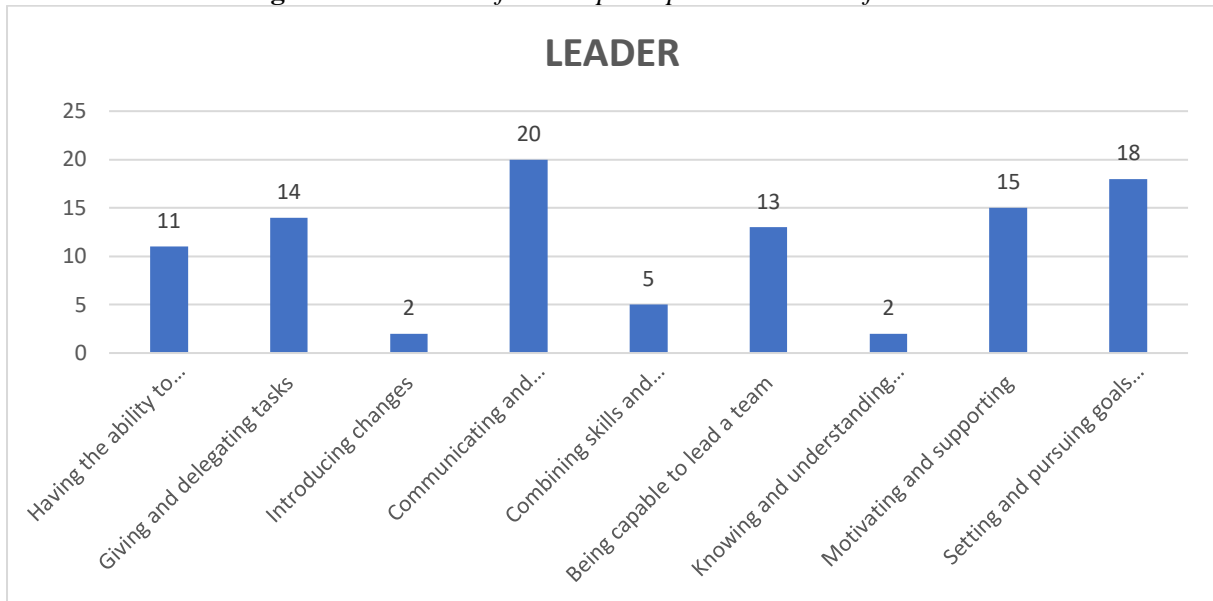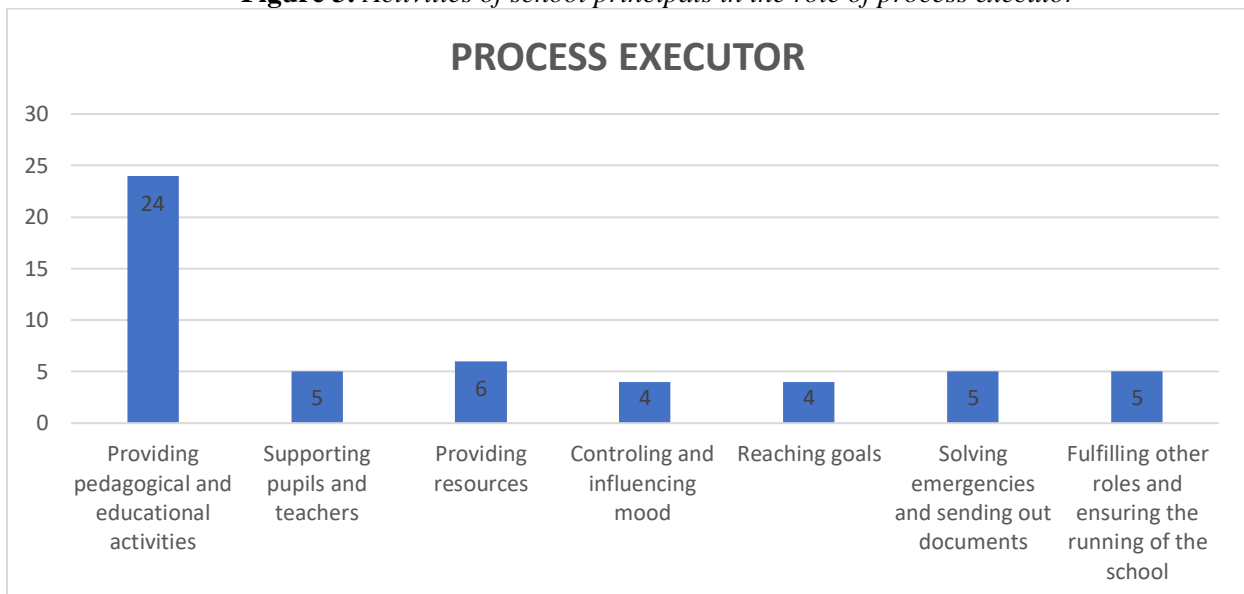- Fulfilling other roles and ensuring the running of the school: 5

*Source: own processing*

Some respondents (12 out of a total of 45) supplemented the previous overview of the roles of the managers and their content also by determining the content of team roles (according to Plamínek, 2009), which can be held by the school principal. Given the number of responses and the roles of leader and director within the Plamínek model, a graphical output from this part of the research survey is given (see Table 2). Respondents used all 9 types of team roles and linked them to the activities of the school principal (with the overall role of manager). We consider the findings from this part of the research survey as a supplement to the basic overview (Figures 1-3)
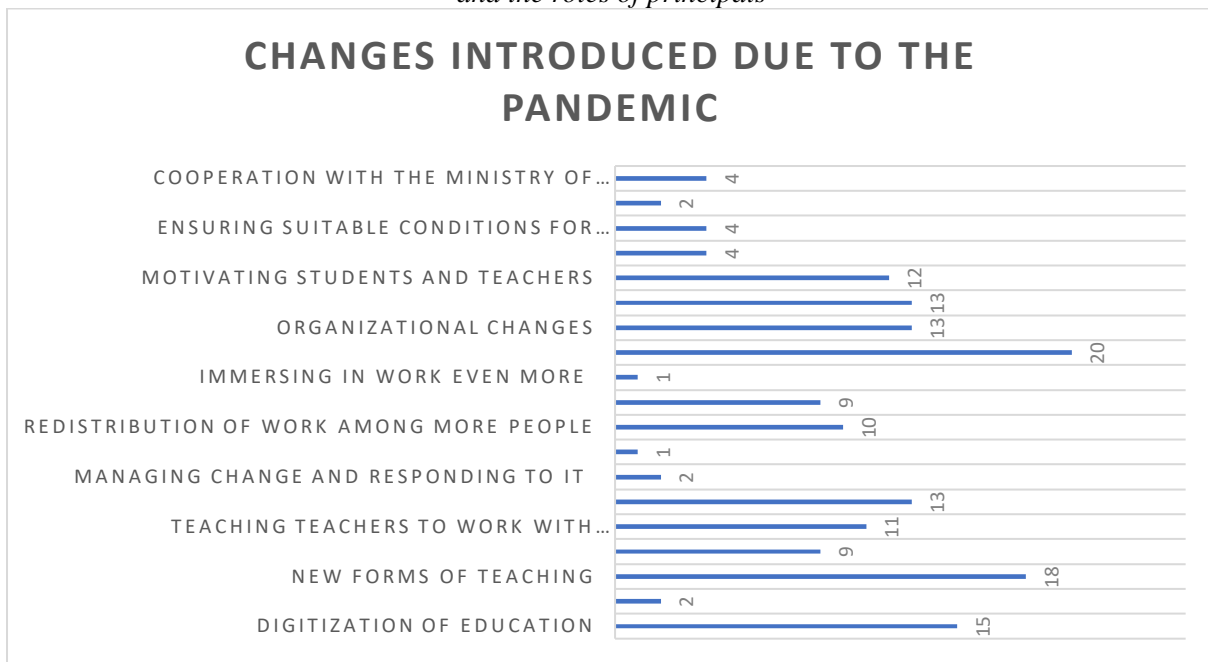
**Table 2:** *Team roles of school principals*

| Team role | What it entails | Frequency |
|---|---|---|
| Leader | Managing strategic and complex thinking combined with empathy | 11 |
| | Having quick responses | 3 |
| | Enthusing others | 3 |
| Thinker | Being creative and playful | 10 |
| Director | Preparing strategies | 6 |
| | Determining tactics | 9 |
| | Delegating tasks | 8 |
| Dictator | Leading the team out of crisis | 10 |
| | Showing one's will at the expense of others | 6 |
| Process specialist | Coming up with inovative ideas | 3 |
| Caretaker | Caring for team welfare | 8 |
| | Solving problems in comunication and relathionships | 5 |
| Finisher | Checking and finalising to perfection | 9 |
| Specialist | Mastering one's discipline | 10 |
| Generator | Generating original methods and ideas | 7 |
| Mover | Driving the team | 5 |
| | Turning ideas into reality | 6 |

*Source: own processing*

In response to RQ2 (*What changes are taking place in the roles of school principals in connection with a pandemic situation /COVID-19/?*), Respondents (n = 45) also reported answers that were related to a change in the overall situation, which forms the context for requirements for managing the roles of regional education managers. In this phase of the research survey, the respondents most often stated: digitization of education (15 respondents), immediate change in the form of education from the beginning of the first emergency (18 respondents), the need to reflect on measures introduced and modify them if necessary (9 respondents) and changes in student evaluation (2 respondents). Complete overview of situational changes in the content of the roles of school principals is given in Figure 4.

Respondents also used the possibility of free statements in written records of the roles of regional education managers (school principals) and in subsequent online interviews. In them, they commented most often: on the generally unclear requirements for the role of education and school in today's society, even in the period following the COVID-19 pandemic (*"It is a question of what society expects from education and actors in it… I do not think that the roles of actors in education will change in any fundamental way, as they have not changed over the last few decades"* – R1), to the application of various theories, especially the management of change in practice in a very short time (*"The managerial roles of change management include and a number of stated and written theories had to be put into practice. The school principal managed this"* – R8), to the necessity of managing self-management, well-being and a large number of different social roles already in the current situation (*„ … the most important thing for me is mental well-being in the circle of my loved ones. "* – R2; *"Although it is difficult to combine family, school and kindergarten, it works, for now. One has to be good in the role of organizer and sometim es afford not to be in any role."* – R4).

**Figure 4:** *The impact of the current situation on changes in regional education*
*and the roles of principals*



## CHANGES INTRODUCED DUE TO THE PANDEMIC

| Category | Value |
|---|---|
| COOPERATION WITH THE MINISTRY OF… | 4 |
| | 2 |
| ENSURING SUITABLE CONDITIONS FOR… | 4 |
| | 4 |
| MOTIVATING STUDENTS AND TEACHERS | 12 |
| | 13 |
| ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGES | 13 |
| | 20 |
| IMMERSING IN WORK EVEN MORE | 1 |
| | 9 |
| REDISTRIBUTION OF WORK AMONG MORE PEOPLE | 10 |
| | 1 |
| MANAGING CHANGE AND RESPONDING TO IT | 2 |
| | 13 |
| TEACHING TEACHERS TO WORK WITH… | 11 |
| | 9 |
| NEW FORMS OF TEACHING | 18 |
| | 2 |
| DIGITIZATION OF EDUCATION | 15 |

*Source: own processing*

**Conclusion**

The aim of the survey, the methodology and results of which are presented in the paper, was to update the contents of key roles of managers in regional education and to determine whether the COVID-19 pandemic also changed the importance that respondents attribute to certain types of roles or partial activities of managers in regional education.

The identified changes in the roles of regional education managers concerned not only the content of such roles, but also the importance of specific sub-roles and competencies that leading pedagogical staff use in managing ongoing changes in education. These changes were accelerated and came to the forefront of public interest in connection with the COVID-19 pandemic. The statements of the respondents also include their ideas on the transfer of meaning or emphasis on certain types of roles in connection with the change, with possible overlaps with future developments and status.

In addition to the contents of the individual roles of school managers and the influence of the current pandemic situation on changes in the content of sub-roles, some respondents also commented on unclear expectations from the role of the school in society. This is also related to the number of roles that school principals have to handle and changes in the content of these roles. According to the respondents of the research survey, the complexity of the role of school principal is associated with possible conflicts with other social roles and with the search for positive starting points and aspects of overcoming the COVID-19 pandemic in society and school as an organization and institution.

The methodology used in this research does not make it possible to generalize the results. At the same time, defining and updating the contents of the roles of regional education managers (school principals) and changes in the requirements for managing such a complex role, also

resulting from the current pandemic situation, can be used for the development of school management theory and as input data for further research in the post-pandemic period.

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