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## Future-proofing teaching: Balancing technology, relationships, and professional growth in Polish teachers' post-pandemic practices

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### Abstract

**Research objectives (aims) and problem(s):** This article investigates how Polish teachers experienced and responded to COVID-19 disruptions, focusing on transformations in pedagogical practice, professional stress, and evolving understandings of professionalism and success.

**Research methods:** The study is a qualitative narrative inquiry conducted within the Global Teachers Voice 2 initiative. It forms part of an international project led by the International Council on Education for Teaching and the Mapping Educational Specialist knowHow charities, including the Teacher Voice Project and the Future-Proofing Education Systems initiative. The study involved 11 purposively selected teachers. Data were collected through online semi-structured interviews and analyzed thematically, using narrative approaches to preserve participants' perspectives and meanings.

**Process of argumentation:** The analysis traces how teachers responded to emotional and organizational challenges while maintaining professional commitment. It examines the interrelations between technology use, relational pedagogy, and professional collaboration as foundations of adaptive practice.

**Research findings and their impact on the development of educational:** The findings show that participants reconstructed their professional identities by emphasizing agency, relationality, adaptive capacity, and a redefinition of professional success beyond performance-based metrics. By foregrounding teachers' voices within the Polish context

and situating the analysis within an international research framework, the study contributes an in-depth, relational perspective to post-pandemic debates on teacher professionalism. It advances theoretical discussions by integrating teacher agency and relational pedagogy, demonstrating how professionalism and success are reshaped through the dynamic interplay of technology, relationships, and autonomy in post-pandemic contexts. These insights inform broader debates on sustainable, human-centered educational development.

**Conclusions and/or recommendations:** Future-oriented education systems should strengthen teachers' professional autonomy, relational competencies, and access to technological and institutional support. Enhancing teacher agency and supporting a multidimensional understanding of professional success are essential for developing resilient, innovative, and inclusive schools. Policy frameworks should move beyond technocentric and performance-driven models toward approaches that recognize the relational, adaptive, and reflective dimensions of teaching.

## Introduction

This article presents findings from the Polish component of the international research project Future-Proofing Education Systems: Learning from the Legacy of the COVID-19 Pandemic (2023–2025). The initiative is grounded in the belief that teachers' lived experiences and professional insights should be central to rethinking education in the wake of COVID-19. It is carried out under the auspices of the International Council on Education for Teaching (ICET) and the Mapping Educational Specialist knowHow (MESH) charities.

This project, also known as the Teacher Voice Project 2023/2025, forms part of the broader Teacher Voice Series, which was launched in 2020. The series aims to provide virtual forums where teachers across the globe can express their views on issues affecting the teaching profession. It also facilitates collaborative, cross-national research on topics related to teacher practice and preparation. Findings from the first Teacher Voice Series project report, *Teacher experiences and practices during COVID-19*, revealed that the COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted teachers both psychologically and professionally. Like others globally (International Teachers Task Force, 2020), teachers experienced heightened anxiety

regarding the health of their families and students. Rapid transitions from in-person to remote teaching required substantial adaptation, particularly in contexts with limited digital infrastructure. Teachers employed alternative and often unconventional strategies to maintain contact with students, especially those from vulnerable or marginalized backgrounds. This shift necessitated the reconfiguration of pedagogical approaches, the acquisition of new competencies in digital technologies (ICT), and engagement with altered dynamics of authority in virtual learning environments (Hordatt Gentles & Leask, 2021).

The current phase of the Teacher Voice Project, grounded in qualitative inquiry, examines how teachers continue to navigate complex professional challenges, redefine their identities, and envision education that is both resilient and relational. The project seeks to ensure that insights gained during the pandemic – particularly regarding teacher learning, pedagogy, practice, autonomy, and agency – are not erased by a hasty return to pre-pandemic norms. Rather than viewing the COVID-19 disruption as a temporary interruption, the broader Future-Proofing Education initiative considers it a critical moment of rupture – one that calls for a reimagining of education systems.

In this context, the primary aim of this study is to interpret how Polish teachers reconstruct and negotiate their understanding of professionalism and professional success in the post-pandemic educational landscape. Rather than offering a broad evaluation of educational reform, the study adopts an interpretive perspective focused on teachers' lived experiences and meaning-making processes.

To address this aim, the study explores three interrelated dimensions of post-pandemic professional practice: (1) the integration of digital technologies and its implications for pedagogy; (2) the relational and ethical foundations of teaching, including wellbeing and student engagement; and (3) the conditions that enable or constrain teacher agency, collaboration, and ongoing professional growth.

Accordingly, the central research question guiding the Polish component of the project is: "How have Polish teachers experienced and interpreted post-pandemic transformations in their professional practice,

and how do they conceptualize sustainable forms of professional success in conditions of ongoing uncertainty?” Subsidiary questions examine how teachers perceive the role of digital technologies, what forms of support and professional learning they consider necessary, and what systemic conditions facilitate or hinder adaptive, relational, and innovative practice.

Building on this international framework, the present analysis focuses specifically on the Polish context to provide an in-depth, situated account of teachers' professional reflections following COVID-19.

### **Teachers and teaching in post-pandemic contexts: Rethinking professionalism and practice**

Teachers' work is becoming increasingly complex in a global landscape shaped by migration, multiculturalism, digitalization, and artificial intelligence. These forces generate not only societal and technological challenges but also policy shifts that intensify accountability, standardization, and performative cultures (Day, 2017; Sachs, 2016), often eroding autonomy and professional trust. At the same time, teachers must reconcile competing expectations from policymakers, parents, students, media, and society, balancing exam-driven outcomes with the broader task of preparing learners for diverse, rapidly changing contexts (Madalińska-Michalak, 2023).

The COVID-19 pandemic amplified these pressures, disrupting education for over 1.5 billion students and 63 million teachers worldwide (International Teachers Task Force, 2020). Teachers became frontline crisis responders, navigating digital divides, inadequate infrastructure, and limited training (OECD, 2020; UNESCO, 2021). Challenges included a lack of equipment and internet access (Zhang et al., 2020), reduced student engagement (Niemi & Kousa, 2020), blurred work-life boundaries (Ünal & Dulay, 2022), and deteriorating wellbeing across school communities (Folkman et al., 2022). These conditions revealed the inadequacy of outcome-based performance metrics and underscored the need to rethink

professionalism in terms of adaptability, resilience, and relational pedagogy (Tan et al., 2025).

Central to post-pandemic professionalism is a critical re-evaluation of the role of technology. While digital tools ensured continuity during lockdowns, the crisis reinforced that technology must serve as a medium to support – not replace – human connection. Unequal access to digital resources raised pressing ethical questions about equity (Di Pietro et al., 2020; Van Dijk, 2020), while the challenges of remote learning highlighted the centrality of care and relational pedagogy (Noddings, 2013).

Future-proofing teaching also depends on robust professional development and collaborative learning communities that foster agency, innovation, and mutual support. However, systemic barriers such as limited time, resources, and institutional backing continue to constrain professional growth (OECD, 2019). The pandemic nevertheless prompted many teachers to reframe their professional identities, leveraging crisis conditions to deepen creativity, resilience, and student-centered practice.

In the post-pandemic landscape, the very notions of teacher and school success require rethinking. Beyond standardized test scores, success is increasingly understood in terms of adaptability, collective capacity, and relational trust. Successful teachers and schools are those able to sustain student engagement, foster wellbeing, and innovate under conditions of uncertainty (Day & Gurr, 2024; Madalińska-Michalak & Flores, 2025). In disruptive times, as Harris and Jones (2020) argue, success is less about compliance with external standards and more about collaboration, distributed leadership, and resilience across school communities. Such perspectives reinforce the need to view teachers as co-constructors of educational futures rather than as implementers of externally imposed reforms.

## **Methodology and methods**

The methodological framework for this study was developed within the context of the Global Teachers Voice 2 initiative. The study sought to understand how teachers made sense of changes in teaching practices,

professional identity, technology use, and emotional wellbeing during this period. Key research questions focused on identifying the most significant changes in teaching after the pandemic, teachers' responses to these changes, perceived challenges and barriers in professional development, and the role of technology in education.

A qualitative approach (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018) with narrative elements was adopted to provide an in-depth understanding of participants' lived experiences (Clandinin, 2006; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This approach allowed the researchers to capture the richness of individual stories, reflecting how teachers navigated professional challenges and opportunities in a rapidly changing educational landscape.

The primary data collection method consisted of semi-structured interviews conducted online via Microsoft Teams, each lasting between 30 and 40 minutes. The interview protocol, developed collaboratively by the international research team, addressed nine thematic areas, including changes in teaching practice, classroom management, the use of technology, professional support, and reflections on professional growth. Follow-up prompts enabled the interviewers to explore emergent topics in depth while maintaining comparability across participants.

The Polish sample consisted of 11 participants, selected using purposive and reputational sampling (Etikan et al., 2016) to ensure the inclusion of teachers and teacher educators recognized for professional excellence, leadership, and innovation. Participants represented a range of educational contexts, including primary and secondary schools, urban and rural settings, and public and private institutions. The group included active teachers with varying years of experience, as well as one recently retired teacher educator. The recruitment process involved professional networks, associations, and snowball sampling, and participation was voluntary, without financial incentives.

Data collection occurred between February and May 2025. All interviews were recorded with participants' informed consent, transcribed verbatim, and securely stored. Thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's model (2021), was applied to identify patterns within and across participant narratives. NVivo software was used to facilitate systematic

coding, while collaborative coding sessions ensured consistency and reliability. Elements of narrative inquiry were integrated to preserve participants' personal reflections and to provide nuanced insight into their professional adaptation and resilience.

Ethical approval was granted by the University of Worcester Research Ethics Committee, and all procedures adhered to internationally recognized standards, including GDPR and the Declaration of Helsinki. Participants' identities were protected through pseudonymization, and measures were taken to ensure confidentiality, voluntary participation, and participant validation of preliminary findings.

### Findings

This study captured the perspectives of highly experienced teachers from diverse contexts. This diversity enriched the dataset, providing a multifaceted view of teaching during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite differences in roles and contexts, participants shared common concerns, strategies, and reflections, which coalesced around six interrelated themes: changes in teaching practice, the role of technology in education, barriers to technology integration, professional development and support needs, the irreplaceable role of the teacher, and the importance of collaboration and teacher support networks.

These themes illustrate how teachers navigated pandemic-era challenges while reshaping their understanding of professional growth and achievement. Together, these themes offer a comprehensive picture of how teachers reshaped their practice, developed adaptive expertise, and sustained meaningful human and professional connections.

The following sections describe the interrelated themes that capture how participants navigated pandemic-era challenges while reshaping their understanding of professional growth and achievement. Due to the limited length of this article, only three of the six identified themes are presented. Each theme is illustrated with direct quotes from participants, highlighting the depth and authenticity of their lived experiences.

### ***Changes in teaching practice and pedagogy***

The abrupt transition to remote and hybrid learning compelled teachers to revise their pedagogical approaches fundamentally. Participants described this transformation as both disruptive and developmental. Remote teaching required the rapid adoption of unfamiliar technologies and the design of new instructional strategies, often without prior preparation or guidance. This experience forced many educators to experiment with digital tools and rethink the structure, pacing, and interactivity of their lessons, as expressed in the following illustrative quotes:

- “The pandemic forced me to learn new technologies. I had to learn how to use Microsoft Teams, and considering the age of the students, remote learning was challenging.” (P01)
- “The pandemic accelerated the digital revolution in education, but for us teachers, it was a difficult challenge.” (P02)
- “Forced transition to distance learning opened new horizons but also revealed many problems. I studied actively to create new strategies, integrating the curriculum with new digital tools.” (P03)
- “We’re using audios, videos, and new platforms, facing problems, and attending seminars to make the classroom more interactive.” (P04)

While challenging, this transition also fostered pedagogical innovation and professional growth. For some, it catalyzed a deeper understanding of how to create engaging, flexible learning environments that respond to diverse student needs.

### ***Professional development and support needs***

The pandemic underscored the urgent need for sustained, expert-led professional development, particularly in digital pedagogy. Teachers reported limited access to high-quality, formal training, often relying on time-consuming self-directed learning that many found insufficient. There was a strong demand for short, hands-on workshops, regular peer exchanges, and support in emerging areas such as artificial intelligence and advanced educational technologies.

Beyond technical skills, participants highlighted the importance of broader professional learning opportunities encompassing communication, leadership, and personal development – vital for managing the complex demands of post-pandemic teaching. Teachers stressed that:

- “I need better educational resources and access to free training.” (P04)
- “I would like to expand my qualifications with knowledge in digital competencies and artificial intelligence.” (P06)
- “I need short in-person workshops with trainers. Searching for digital tools alone is exhausting.” (P08)
- “Personality development classes should be done regularly by professionals – not just school heads.” (P09)

These reflections underline that effective professional development should combine technical skills with personal and professional growth, supported by structured, accessible, and context-sensitive training initiatives. Teachers’ experiences point to the need for ongoing systemic support that equips them to navigate rapidly changing educational environments successfully.

### ***The irreplaceable role of the teacher: Balancing human connection and technological innovation***

Despite embracing technology, teachers unanimously affirmed that it cannot replace the relational and emotional dimensions of teaching. Personal interaction, empathy, and presence were foundational to student learning, especially for younger children and those with complex social-emotional needs. Participants emphasized the need to preserve human-centered pedagogies even as technological tools become more prevalent. This supports a balanced, blended approach in which technology enhances but never substitutes the empathetic, engaged teacher. Teachers mentioned that:

- “It’s important to maintain a balance between modern and traditional teaching methods, especially with young children.” (P01)

- “Besides technology, we need to use traditional methods like working with books.” (P02)
- “Technology should support – not replace – a kind, involved, passionate teacher.” (P04)
- “Online assessments are difficult to control. In-person presence makes a big difference.” (P08)

Overall, teachers highlighted that effective teaching during and after the pandemic depends on maintaining human connection while integrating technology. Teachers' reflections indicate that successful pedagogical innovation is not merely about digital adoption, but about using technology to support engagement, empathy, and meaningful interaction. Balancing technological tools with relational teaching practices emerges as a central principle for fostering student learning and wellbeing.

### **Redefining success**

Across the themes identified in this study, teachers offered a deeply nuanced redefinition of success, moving beyond standardized metrics. Professional achievement is measured by adaptability, innovation, and sustaining meaningful human connections. Reflective practice, collaborative engagement, and thoughtful integration of technology emerged as key markers of success. Teachers highlighted that:

- “Even online, my priority was that students feel seen and supported. That defines real success.” (P04)
- “Technology can never replace empathy, encouragement, and the personal presence a student needs.” (P06)
- “Success isn't just what I do in my classroom – it's how we as teachers support each other and develop shared strategies.” (P08)

The post-pandemic period, despite its challenges, became a space for profound professional growth. Teachers described developing both

digital and relational competencies, experimenting with novel pedagogical strategies, and reclaiming agency over their professional practice. As one participant reflected, “The pandemic forced me to learn new technologies. I had to adapt quickly, and this process changed the way I structure my lessons” (P01). Another noted, “Remote teaching opened new horizons and pushed me to integrate digital tools creatively with the curriculum” (P03). These experiences show how adaptive expertise, rather than traditional performance indicators, became a central marker of success.

Equally important was the ability to maintain a human connection. Even in virtual classrooms, participants prioritized relational engagement. As one teacher observed, “Even online, my priority was that students feel seen and supported. That defines real success” (P04), while another emphasized, “Technology can never replace empathy, encouragement, and the personal presence a student needs” (P06). Such reflections illustrate that relational depth is inseparable from teaching excellence, reinforcing the idea that professional achievement is both human-centered and contextually grounded.

Collaboration and shared professional reflection further enriched this vision of success. As one educator explained, “Success isn’t just what I do in my classroom – it’s how we as teachers support each other and develop shared strategies” (P08). Another noted, “Sharing experiences with colleagues gave me practical solutions and emotional support that I couldn’t achieve alone” (P11). In this way, participants emphasized that success is both individual and collective, cultivated through networks of trust, mentorship, and peer learning.

Technology, initially a source of stress during the rapid shift to remote teaching, evolved into a vehicle for innovation. Teachers described leveraging digital tools to enhance pedagogy without sacrificing relational engagement. According to one participant, “Technology opened new possibilities, but it must support, not replace, the teacher’s role” (P02), while another reflected, “Blending online tools with traditional methods allowed me to reach students in ways I hadn’t before, yet kept the relational aspect intact” (P10). Here, success is defined not by the mere adoption

of technology, but by its thoughtful integration to support meaningful teaching and learning.

Central to this redefinition was the role of reflective practice and professional agency. Teachers shared that they experienced success when they could experiment, learn from mistakes, and implement strategies that genuinely benefited students. As one participant explained, “I feel successful when I can experiment, learn from mistakes, and implement strategies that truly help students” (P05). Another added, “Continuous reflection on my practice allows me to grow professionally, which I value more than any external evaluation” (P09).

These narratives collectively reveal that the broader conception of success emerging from this study can be understood through six inter-related dimensions:

1. adaptive professional growth and innovation,
2. the ability to sustain meaningful human connections,
3. collaborative engagement with peers,
4. thoughtful integration of technology,
5. reflective and autonomous professional practice, and
6. a holistic vision of post-pandemic achievement that embraces resilience, flexibility, and community.

Each dimension is grounded in teachers' lived experiences, showing how these elements intersect to shape a multidimensional understanding of success. For example, one participant summarized this holistic view by stating, “Teaching is about sustaining communities, caring for learners, and being flexible in the face of change. That is what being successful really means” (P07).

In sum, the redefined concept of success moves beyond conventional metrics to capture the relational, adaptive, and reflective qualities that teachers themselves value. By centering teachers' voices, this study highlights that professional achievement in the post-pandemic era is multidimensional, emergent from practice, and inseparable from the social and technological contexts in which teaching occurs. This perspective

offers a more authentic, sustainable, and human-centered understanding of what it truly means to succeed as a teacher today.

## Discussion

This study explored how Polish teachers engaged with the unprecedented challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on professional stress, adaptation to digital tools, relational pedagogy, and evolving understandings of success and professionalism. The findings indicate a complex process of professional identity reconstruction, contributing to debates on teacher agency and resilience in times of systemic disruption.

The transition to remote and hybrid learning initially destabilized pedagogical routines; however, it also created conditions for experimentation, innovation, and enhanced responsiveness to diverse learner needs. Technology functioned simultaneously as an enabler of pedagogical flexibility and as a structural constraint, underscoring the importance of context-sensitive integration and attention to digital inequalities. Professional growth emerged not solely as an individual endeavor but as a relational and systemic process supported by peer collaboration, institutional structures, and reflective practice. Importantly, the data reaffirm that relational and emotional dimensions of teaching remain foundational and cannot be substituted by digital solutions.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings support a multidimensional understanding of educational change in which technological innovation, relational ethics, and professional autonomy interact dynamically. Sustainable educational development therefore requires balancing digital transformation with human-centered pedagogies and collaborative professional cultures.

### ***Redefining success: Teacher growth, resilience, and meaning-making***

Participants reconceptualized professional success beyond standardized performance indicators, emphasizing resilience, adaptability, relational engagement, and collective responsibility. Their accounts align

with scholarship highlighting the moral and social foundations of professionalism (Biesta, 2015; Day, 2017; Noddings, 2012). Success was framed as adaptive expertise and reflective capacity rather than solely by measurable outcomes. This perspective challenges deficit-oriented narratives of burnout and instead positions teachers as active agents of renewal and innovation. At the school level, success was often described as collective, grounded in collegiality and shared leadership (Madalińska-Michalak, 2024).

The pandemic acted as a catalyst for reclaiming a more authentic, human-centered conception of professional achievement. Participants emphasized adaptive expertise and reflective practice rather than conventional performance indicators as central markers of success, as highlighted in such statements as the following:

- “The pandemic forced me to learn new technologies. I had to adapt quickly, and this process changed the way I structure my lessons” (P01).
- “Remote teaching opened new horizons and pushed me to integrate digital tools creatively with the curriculum” (P03).

Teachers emphasized sustaining meaningful connections with students, maintaining engagement despite disruptions, and providing mutual support through collaborative networks. This contrasts with narrow, performance-based definitions and underscores the centrality of care, adaptability, and professional agency in effective teaching. At the school level, success often manifested collectively through collaboration among teachers, mutual support networks, and leadership practices that encourage flexibility and shared responsibility (Madalińska-Michalak, 2024).

This redefinition also serves as a form of resistance against prevailing burnout narratives. Teachers positioned themselves as active agents of innovation and renewal, emphasizing growth, creativity, and meaning-making. These findings resonate with research demonstrating that professional identities can evolve constructively during crises when supported by collegial relationships, reflective practice, and school leadership (Day & Gurr, 2024).

### ***Balancing technology and human connection***

Teachers developed digital competencies while emphasizing that technology should complement, not replace, relational pedagogy. Concerns regarding digital fatigue, equity of access, and ethical considerations were evident. Maintaining empathy and personalized engagement was seen as indispensable, particularly for younger learners and those with complex socio-emotional needs.

Participants advocated for a balanced approach in which technology enhances pedagogical flexibility without undermining relational ethics. This aligns with research on digital pedagogy that promotes ethical, context-sensitive, and teacher-led technology integration in education (Selwyn, 2016; Williamson et al., 2020).

### ***Collaboration and professional support networks***

Peer networks and collective reflection were identified as key resources for enhancing resilience and innovation. Teachers emphasized the need for systemic support structures, including ongoing professional development, organizational conditions that encourage experimentation, and meaningful participation in policymaking.

These findings highlight the critical role of professional learning communities and collegial networks in sustaining innovation and teacher wellbeing, confirming previous research on teacher resilience and professional growth (Day & Gu, 2014; Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018). Without such support, sustaining the adaptability and relational practices developed during the pandemic may be difficult.

### ***Implications for policy and future educational practice***

The findings suggest that post-pandemic educational policy should extend beyond technocentric or performance-driven models. Broader conceptions of educational success – encompassing wellbeing, relational competence, and professional agency – are essential. Investments in digital infrastructure must be integrated with sustained professional learning, collaborative structures, and institutional recognition of teacher expertise.

By foregrounding teachers' voices and autonomy, education systems can sustain adaptive practices, foster innovation, and better prepare for future disruptions. The pandemic demonstrates that lasting improvements in education depend not only on technology or policy, but on nurturing the human, relational, and reflective dimensions of teaching practice.

### **Study limitations**

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the qualitative narrative design prioritizes depth of understanding over generalizability. The sample was small and purposively selected, focusing on 11 teachers recognized for professional excellence, which limits the results' transferability to broader populations. Second, the study is situated within the Polish educational context, and although they are embedded in an international research initiative, the findings primarily reflect local experiences and conditions. Comparative perspectives across countries were beyond the scope of this analysis. Third, due to space limitations, only selected themes could be presented in depth, preventing a full exploration of all identified dimensions. Future research could include larger and more diverse samples, cross-national comparisons, and longitudinal designs to examine post-pandemic transformations in teacher professionalism further.

### **Conclusions**

Teachers' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic point to a substantive transformation in professional roles and conceptions of success, foregrounding resilience, adaptability, relational depth, and professional agency as defining features of contemporary teaching. The crisis accelerated technological integration while simultaneously exposing structural inequalities and the limitations of narrowly technocentric approaches to reform.

The findings indicate that sustainable educational development requires more than investment in digital infrastructure. Rather, it depends on equitable resource distribution, sustained and research-informed professional development, and organizational cultures that cultivate collaboration, reflective practice, and teacher autonomy. Professional learning should encompass not only digital competence but also leadership, communication, and relational pedagogy as integral dimensions of future-oriented professionalism. Recognizing teachers as agents of innovation and meaning-making enables education systems to move toward human-centered models of schooling capable of responding flexibly to future disruptions.

Success in education can no longer be defined solely through traditional performance benchmarks but must also encompass the capacity to adapt, connect, and generate meaning in conditions of uncertainty. Institutionalizing this multidimensional understanding of professional success is essential for nurturing resilient learning communities and advancing education systems that are both innovative and deeply humane. By foregrounding relational, adaptive, and reflective capacities alongside technological competence, schools can sustain meaningful professional growth and ethically grounded practice, thereby strengthening the foundations of resilient education systems (Madalińska-Michalak & Flores, 2025).

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