

# The concept of school organizational culture in (post)pandemic environment

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**Abstract.** In the context of sociological interest, the fundamental goal of our research was to determine the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on organizational culture within elementary schools. The authors started from the assumption that the COVID-19 pandemic influenced changes within the organizational culture, negatively affecting the organization of the school's work as an educational institution. The research was conducted during June and July 2021. A quantitative and qualitative approach was combined using survey methods and semi-structured interviews. An elementary school in the Split-Dalmatia County, Croatia, was chosen for the case study. The survey was conducted with the teachers at the school, and a semi-structured interview was conducted with the principal and professional associates. The sample included part of employees of the selected school (teachers), i.e., thirty respondents. The research results indicate that the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the organizational culture of elementary schools and is the cause of numerous changes that are not necessarily negative. Most of the changes occurred within the organization of work and teaching. Changes in forms of work during a pandemic did not have a negative effect on the school collective, and there was no disruption of relationships, working environment, atmosphere, communication, and cooperation within the collective. It is concluded that supportive school culture will be reflected in student achievements and the work of all employees, and will have a wider positive social impact and therefore should be encouraged.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Culture is an important characteristic of an organization. To that extent, it is the most significant segment of the social system and the "basic connective tissue" that connects the technical and social subsystems [1]. Culture thus implies a certain pattern of learned common basic assumptions that individuals adopt when solving the problem of external adaptation and at the same time internal integration [2]. There are numerous factors that affect organizational culture, starting with leadership style, organizational characteristics, and process management. In relation to work groups within the organization, organizational culture manifests itself when performing tasks as well as the relationship between superiors and subordinates, willingness to help, interaction and willingness to work as a team. It also includes the leader's behavior, reward procedures, communication, and cooperation [3, 4]. Organizational culture thus directly affects the ways of organizing, the type of power and forms of control, the level of formalization and decentralization, as well as the management of human resources [5].

Although organizational culture holds the organization together, it can also become an obstacle within the innovation process. It is a slow process, but certain critical events can speed up its transformation [6], so to that extent the COVID-19 pandemic can be

considered just such a type of "trigger". At the same time, school culture presents a challenge to researchers in the field of education primarily due to its complexity and multidimensionality, as well as the fact that it refers to the totality of school relationships [7]. We also see the school as an organization, which implies having its own organizational culture, meaning a series of values, beliefs and norms that are reflected in different systems and subsystems. In different organizations, there is a different atmosphere, energy, interpersonal relations, degree of freedom as well as the way of working and performing tasks [1]. In this sense, the organizational culture most often reflects the previous way of behavior and values of the members of the organization and is determined because of joint or organizational learning. The new common experience is the basis for shaping a new culture that is now becoming a common feature. Of particular importance is the degree to which this behavior proved successful when adapting to demands from the environment (external adaptation) or when solving internal problems (internal integration) [8]. If an educational institution is characterized by a negative and unfavorable culture, this has a negative impact on the overall functioning of the school. Thus, schools with a negative culture are marked by a series of failures and crises, which affects the creation of a bad atmosphere and attitude, that in turn has a negative impact on all activities within the school [9]. According to Silov [10],

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the structure and organization of a school does not differ too much from the organization of a company, because schools also possess a unique organizational culture, the effects of which are manifested in learning outcomes and work efficiency.

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly changed the education system at the global level, the consequences of which are visible at the economic and social level. According to UNESCO, only 20% of countries had resources for online learning before the pandemic, and the World Bank reports that no country has a curriculum for digital learning. The impact of the pandemic on education is significant, and what is needed to bring this impact under control is careful planning of measures and finding suitable solutions [11]. In March 2020, to stop the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, schools switched to conducting classes via online platforms, which was a big challenge for the entire educational system of the Republic of Croatia. Most teachers during online classes, i.e., remote work, worked much longer and more intensively than before the pandemic [12]. This reflected on existing aspects of school culture and at the same time influenced the creation of its new forms. Following the above, the focus of this paper is precisely the analysis of the organizational culture within the primary school in the context and circumstances of the pandemic. A school is a social institution that conducts an educational process for members of a certain society, and in doing so, it includes a community of students and teachers, as well as professional, administrative and support staff. Its basic purpose is to promote education and achieve the highest possible quality of education for students. Thus, the fundamental elements of school culture (values, attitudes and beliefs of employees, cultural norms, relationships, rituals and ceremonies, leadership, cooperation with parents and the local community, curriculum, etc.) can, with their positive or negative features, encourage or hinder the achievement of educational goals and influence interpersonal relationships at school [8, 13].

## 2 METHODOLOGY

The specific research goals within our research were related to the analysis of school characteristics in the context of goals, strategy, and management style; collective involvement during the decision-making process; experiences of teachers in remote work; change within the working environment, atmosphere, communication, motivation and sense of belonging and efficiency of work organization. The research started from the assumption of a significant impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on changes within the organizational culture, which had a negative impact on the organization of the work of the school as an educational institution (e.g., interpersonal relations, working environment, atmosphere, communication, and cooperation within the collective).

A primary school in the Split-Dalmatia County was selected as a part of the case study. A quantitative and qualitative research approach was combined, and a

survey questionnaire and a semi-structured interview were used. The survey questionnaire was distributed to teachers, and a semi-structured interview was conducted with the principal and professional associates of the elementary school (defectologist and pedagogue). The questionnaire consisted of thirty-five questions (closed type and Likert scales) and included socio-demographic features as well as questions about experiences, attitudes and opinions about the organizational culture within the primary school before and during the Covid-19 pandemic. The sample included part of elementary school employees, thirty of them. Through a semi-structured interview, we tried to get a more detailed insight into the structure of the organization, the environment and management style, the quality of relationships, changes, and the experience of working during the pandemic. The interviews were conducted at the beginning of July 2021 in the premises of the elementary school, following all epidemiological measures. The participants were familiar with the goals and purpose of the research, and prior to conducting the interview, informed consent was obtained as well as the consent of the participants to record the interview and use the transcript. All materials are stored in the researcher's private archive.

## 3 RESEARCH RESULTS

### 3.1 Sociodemographic characteristics

The primary school included in this case study is a predominantly female collective - 80% women and 20% men. At the same time, 80% of teachers are over 36 years old. It is a mature, female school collective, where 70% of employees are subject teachers, and the remaining 30% are classroom teachers. Almost 84% of respondents are married and the same number have children (83.3%). In relation to work status, everyone has an employment contract for an indefinite period (90%). Most respondents have 6-10 and 11-15 years of experience (23.3% within each category), while 6.7% of employees have between 26-30 years of experience, and 10% of them have over 31 years of experience.

### 3.2 Features of the organization and management style

According to the results of the research, 83.3% of respondents believe that the management style of the school is democratic and encouraging. Professional associates share this opinion with teachers:

*- Without further ado, democratic. Cooperation and agreement are fundamental concepts. This has always been the case, both before the pandemic and now during the pandemic. There is no practice of showing power. We are all equally important in the wheel of the functioning of the system, the only thing that concerns authority, there are somehow unwritten norms that we are aware of in our actions. I think it is normal and I see it more as a way of showing respect than hierarchy and power.*

The principal describes his leadership style as democratic and authoritative. He believes that the system is autonomous and there are no boundaries between employees based on hierarchical position. This model is seen as responsible for good relations, communication, and atmosphere within the collective. He points out that the pandemic did not affect this domain of organizational culture, that is, it did not cause changes despite the difficult circumstances of work:

*- Well, it's always kind of the same, the pandemic didn't change anything, i.e., had an impact. I would describe it as an authoritative style. The same should be shown, not to everyone, some will naturally respect the institution of the principal, but sometimes some people need to be made aware that the principal is also responsible for their actions. So, I am directing and pointing to something so that everything will be fine, not to show power or anything like that. Everything is done in agreement...So, the hierarchical structure is particularly important, but more important is agreement and some understanding.*

### **3.3 The fundamental goals of the organization**

Most of the respondents (36.6%) consider growth and stability as the most important goal of the organization, while for 13.3% of the respondents, the most important is the production of knowledge. 6.7% see recognition in relation to other schools (status determination) as a basic goal, and 3.3% see recognition in relation to other schools (success in competitions). According to the results, for half of the respondents, the school has a clear vision of development in which everyone participates equally.

The basic goal of every school is quality education and student progress. Accordingly, the strategy, goals and vision of the school are created. The circumstances of the pandemic did not affect the changes within the goals, which remained the same, they were only reorganized and adapted to the new situation:

*- The goals that we set as primary are somehow based on the prescribed school curriculum, so accordingly nothing has changed in terms of strategy and some ideals and ideas of work, what has changed is therefore the performance and maintenance of classes. Regarding some of our usual plans, programs, priorities, goals, missions, everything remained the same. But, for example, some activities that we plan in the form of programs and projects were not realized because there was no possibility for it, but that does not mean that we removed those ideas from the list, they are just waiting for their time, so again I cannot say that something is in sight strategy changed. The goals were just reorganized.*

### **3.4 Advantages and disadvantages of working in a pandemic**

As an advantage of working in a pandemic, the participants point out the digitization process in the first place. They state that under normal circumstances, investments in technical equipment, high-speed internet,

and teacher education for working with digital tools and on digital platforms would not have happened so quickly. As the disadvantages of working in a pandemic, stress, nervousness, too long a working day and the fact of a significantly larger volume of work, along with difficulties related to the organization and delivery of classes, are highlighted. Basically, for our interlocutors, work during a pandemic has more disadvantages than advantages, and the biggest challenges to work were reflected in adaptation and separation, i.e., the absence of a social component:

*- ... I don't know, this separation bothered me the most, I don't see the student, I don't see the parent, I don't see the co-worker, it was quite difficult for me to work that way and I was afraid that I wasn't providing enough for the students, and that's something I don't want at all.*

*- That is something incomparable. That social component and contacts, which is something you can't live without.*

As the greatest threat to work in a pandemic, the interlocutors cite a feeling of powerlessness, concern for learning outcomes and, of course, concern for health and the fear of infection:

*- Well, we were afraid that our health would not be endangered and that someone would not get hurt and fall ill. And yet we were worried about the learning outcomes and the children themselves, we were afraid of the consequences of how all this would affect them. Especially my work and children with difficulties.*

*- In certain moments you have no solution, which was the worst. So, you must do something, act, and you simply don't know, somehow there is no solution.*

When we asked our participants what should and could be changed to achieve progress in future work in the possible conditions of a pandemic, the need to define the boundaries of work, instructions and suggestions from the competent ministry, which must be submitted on time, was mentioned in order to be able to adapt better and faster, while creating even more advanced and practical digital tools.

### **3.5 Organization of schoolwork in the circumstances of the pandemic**

The principal states that the school, as an educational institution, was not ready for the form of distance learning and that at the beginning they were not fully technologically equipped with the absence of instructions from the competent ministry. Therefore, they were oriented towards greater cooperation with other schools and used the same tools, which they would change or upgrade over time and as needed. But despite the difficulties, the entire team always tried to provide the students with a system and functioning as similar as possible to the previous one:

*- We were not well prepared for distance learning, namely we had no experience. Then we used the tools that we had at hand, later you see that that tool is not the best, the most practical one, so you start all over again.*

Furthermore, the principal points out that the ministry has gradually defined all segments and guidelines of work, so the organization has improved as a result:

- *The Ministry gave guidelines, so we organized classes and all other work segments accordingly.*

The new school year started much better primarily due to better organization at the national level, but also the fact that quite a bit of time has passed, and we have "met" the virus and learned to live with it:

- *...things were a little easier, we were already used to adapting. The organization was better, and everything happened in real time.*

- *...we functioned as concretely and meaningfully as possible, especially in the second wave...everything was in real time, according to the timetable.*

As far as teaching is concerned, until the pandemic, classroom teaching was practiced inside the school, and when the pandemic appeared, classroom teaching was practiced. According to the definition, this means that the students are constantly in the same room, and the professors take turns:

- *The professors had to adapt, until now they had their own classroom with all the necessary materials for work, and now they carried everything with them. That was also difficult, especially for subjects with a practical part, e.g., art, music, technical, chemistry.*

### 3.6 Experience of working in a pandemic

More than half of the respondents worked longer than in the time before the pandemic (usual 8 hours). Forty percent of them work 9-10 hours, 6.7% 10-12 hours, and 13 or more hours of work are recorded by 10% of respondents. Only 16.7% worked less than 6 hours, and only 26% of respondents worked the usual 7-8 hours. The duration of the working day has been extended during the first months of the pandemic, moreover, in the there was no specified work period at all. The statement of the principal and professional associates support this:

- *Well, there used to be calls even at 9:00 in the evening, but it is clear to me, we can't influence some things, I'm the main person responsible, so everything is clear to me, I understand everything. But then again, it was not every day. It was much more difficult for teachers and professors there. I think that with them there was no break at certain intervals, nor was there a time limit for work, until they found themselves and established some things, for example, that the homework should be sent by seven in the evening the day before that class, that is, the subject.*

The pandemic has significantly affected the average length of the working day. She significantly extended it, but also made it more difficult:

- *...it looked quite chaotic. Laptop, tablet, cell phone with you all day, there was no time organization. There was no boundary between free time and working time, we were constantly monitored, we were constantly involved in virtual classrooms, our WhatsApp groups for communication, e-mail and so on. The work was all day long.*

The Covid-19 pandemic has affected the previous way of life and work (57%), while 44% of respondents notice changes in the private sphere of life amid a collision with business, and 60% of respondents point out that remote work during the pandemic correlated with their private life. Despite the stated percentages, almost 34% of respondents do not see a negative impact of work during the pandemic on their private life.

Despite the mentioned circumstances, most respondents (37%) positively evaluate the experience of working during a pandemic. Through an interview with the principal and professional associates, we find out their perception of the work experience, which coincides with the general opinion of the collective:

- *... I cannot describe it as negative, but it was really tiring and difficult. I think it suffices to say that she would never trade it for this usual physical experience of work.*

- *Well, I would characterize all this as unavoidable, but again, some positive things came out of it that should be used and applied in the post-pandemic era. So, it was thorny, both positive and negative. In my opinion, nothing can adequately replace face-to-face interaction and work.*

Also, despite the changed working conditions, for 70% of respondents, the overall organization at the school in the circumstances of the pandemic was effective and efficient. The school is characterized by good cooperation - 63.3% of respondents did not change their attitude despite the pandemic. It is about a stable collective within which almost 94% of respondents consider themselves accepted by the collective. None of the respondents rate their relationships with colleagues as bad, on the contrary, 56.7% rate them as exceptionally good, 20% as good, and 23.3% as excellent. The situation is similar with relations with superiors - 50% of respondents see relations as exceptionally good, 13.3% as good and 36.7% as excellent. It is possible to notice that a greater number of respondents rate relations with superiors as better, in contrast to relations with colleagues. Furthermore, 50% of respondents see relations with superiors both before and during the pandemic as appropriate, and 46.7% of them see them as extremely appropriate.

In the variable of collective involvement in decision-making, almost identical results were recorded before and during the pandemic - slightly more than half of the respondents believe that teachers are often involved in decision-making.

The methods of decision-making and action within the school are democratic and accompanied by quality communication. The collective is connected, it is characterized by togetherness, cooperation, and joint decision-making. This was the situation before the pandemic, and it remained the same even in the circumstances of the pandemic. There are no changes in decision-making processes:

- *Both before and now, decisions are made within the collective. We are characterized by joint action and decision-making. So, more or less everyone participates, everyone is involved at least through some comments, if not proposals and suggestions.*

- *I do not decide anything myself, everything is somehow democratic in the collective at the sessions. This is a widespread practice, now in the pandemic it is even, I can say, more concrete and pronounced.*

The collective is characterized by democracy within the process of management and action, quality communication, the possibility and practice of cooperation, providing help and support, which is especially emphasized in stressful pandemic circumstances. The main part, i.e., everything that can be done (what is not defined by the instructions of the ministry) is decided at the school council meetings.

During the pandemic, the Ministry had greater control over the entire educational system, but this did not negatively affect the organization of work and the delivery of classes. About 40% of respondents believe that the autonomy of the system and the unique organizational culture of the school was not violated by the interference of the competent ministry. During the interview, the interlocutors explained to us how:

- *...most decisions are made within the collective, with instructions from the competent ministry. Now in the pandemic, it's a little, I would say changed, there are guidelines from the top that we must follow blindly, but they are directives of the ministry that must be respected... I just want to say that we had less freedom than under normal circumstances.*

A total of 70% of respondents ("often" 40%; 30% "always") feel free to propose innovative ideas, 23.3% of them sometimes feel free to propose something, and the remaining 6.7% rarely. More than half (56.7%) of respondents feel important within the collective, 40% of them are undecided and cannot assess, so they declare themselves as "neither important nor unimportant".

He believes that 73.3% of respondents had complete freedom when deciding on the layout of the lesson during the pandemic, and 23.3% were offered guidelines for their own choice. The results showed that 46.7% of respondents sometimes give suggestions and participate in the organization of work and/or teaching (in a pandemic), also 30% of them do it often, 13.3% always, and only 10% rarely.

- *Some colleagues normally hold back. I think it depends a lot on the character of the person, some will suggest something without any problems, others are reserved again... While in the pandemic, here, everyone had an opinion on everything, we heard the voice of those who were somehow not used to it, and here I can say that I personally like it very much and I would like it to stay that way.*

During the pandemic, there was undoubtedly a change in the atmosphere and working environment, but despite this, 70% of respondents describe the working environment as stable without negative situations that would damage the perception of the working environment or something that made them want to change the working environment (60%). The interlocutors state the existence of stress and nervousness, but this did not affect the working environment, atmosphere, or communication too much:

- *The working atmosphere and working atmosphere that prevails, communication, interpersonal relations*

*that are at a high level. We all contribute to making the working atmosphere positive and interactive. We solve all problems through compromise and conversation without any turbulence. Teamwork, connection, help, especially now in the pandemic, when we had to train overnight to use certain digital tools, younger colleagues jumped in to help and nothing was difficult for anyone, even though they sometimes crossed their main field of work. As a school, we really are a quality and constructive community. There is no formality, there is a homely atmosphere. Cooperation is the foundation. I enjoy working at this school, I'm satisfied, and I wouldn't change anything.*

Despite the circumstances of the pandemic, there were no negative changes within the school in relation to communication, cooperation, and interpersonal relations. Almost 54% of the respondent's express satisfaction with the communication and atmosphere within the organization in the circumstances of the pandemic, while for 66.7% of them the entire organization during the pandemic was the same as before. The overall organization at the school in the circumstances of the pandemic was effective and efficient for 70% of the respondents, and 60% believe that the work instructions and teaching procedures during the pandemic were clear and up-to-date, and an equal number of them were satisfied with the form of information placement within the organization in the circumstances of the pandemic.

The implementation of additional education in the circumstances of the pandemic was at the level (30% of them constantly participated in additional education, 43.3% sometimes, 23.3% very rarely). The school offers additional training and supplementing of knowledge and skills (53.3%), and a large part would be happy to participate in professional training (64%). Most of the respondent's state that they try to contribute to the development of the institution's culture every day, especially in the circumstances of the pandemic (85%). Furthermore, 53.3% of respondents believe that the school respects the opinion of parents:

- *In our work, both before and now, we try to nurture relationships with parents. They are also an important segment of the school's work because the parents' council sometimes points out some problems that we are not so aware of. Of course, this is then on the agenda at our meetings, and their opinion is extremely important to us.*

## 4 DISCUSSION

According to the obtained results, the Covid-19 pandemic had a significant impact on the organizational culture of the investigated primary school and was the cause of numerous recent changes. Although it was demanding to work in the circumstances of the pandemic, the school's primary interest as an educational institution focused on the well-being of students and learning outcomes remained unchanged. Most of the changes occurred within the organization of work and teaching. The pandemic made teaching difficult, and it was demanding to organize the system and work in new

circumstances. The new school year started more ready primarily due to better organization at the national level, but also the fact that quite a bit of time has passed and the whole society has "acquainted" with the virus and learned to live with it. What the interlocutors point out as a positive change and the biggest advantage of the whole situation is the digitization process. The biggest challenge of working during the pandemic was adaptation and separation, that is, the absence of a social component, and the biggest drawback was reflected in reduced control. The fundamental function of organizational culture is to determine the overall success and development of the organization in a way of direct influence on decision-making processes and directing their implementation. Organizational culture represents a means of realizing a strategy that is nurtured as a guiding thread in business, enabling the realization of goals and vision in practice [1]. If the elements of the organizational culture are well known and if they are successfully aligned with the goals, then the basic prerequisites for the successful operation of the organization have been created [5].

Remote work, of course, has both positive and negative aspects. The duration of the working day has been extended in the first months of the Covid-19 pandemic and the specific working hours did not exist. The situation was somewhat chaotic, and it was the hardest for the teachers. Later, with the passage of time, things somewhat stabilized. In theory, flexible working hours should allow teachers to work when it suits them best, when they are most productive and ready to fulfill their work obligations. The lifestyle should be more relaxed, and individuals could devote themselves freely to other roles, such as the family one. However, in practice it turned out that the situation is drastically different. Most teachers during online classes, i.e., remote work, worked much longer and more intensively than was the case under normal circumstances. Teachers did not have defined working hours due to the need for constant availability to students, and working hours sometimes extended throughout the day [12].

Although working during a pandemic certainly has more negative aspects than positive for our interlocutors, the assumption that the Covid-19 pandemic had a negative impact on the organization of the school's work as an educational institution turned out to be incorrect. The sequence of results shows that the entire organization during the pandemic was the same as before. At the same time, the entire organization at the school in the circumstances of the pandemic was effective for most respondents, and the work instructions and procedures for teaching during the pandemic were clear and up-to-date, and satisfaction was also expressed with the way information was distributed within the organization in the circumstances of the pandemic. Also, in contrast to the assumption that the pandemic had a negative impact on interpersonal relations, the working environment, the atmosphere, communication, cooperation within the collective, the results indicated that there were undoubtedly changes during the pandemic, but they were not necessarily negative. Respondents mostly described the working environment

as stable. The existing stress and nervousness did not damage the working environment, atmosphere, and communication. In relation to the features of communication, both verbal and non-verbal, it indicates the atmosphere and atmosphere within an organization. Thus, according to the level and quality of communication in an organization, we can conclude a lot about the culture of the organization itself [14].

The experience of working during the pandemic was so complex and dynamic that the respondents did not even have time to form an opinion about how they were doing but were "surviving a necessary evil". For most respondents, the Covid-19 pandemic affected their previous way of life and work, 44% of respondents notice changes in the private sphere of life amid a collision with business, and 60% of respondents point out how remote work during the pandemic correlated with their private life.

In many cases, principals tried to find solutions to enable students to continue learning and families to remain connected to the school community, which was also shown in our research. When it comes to principals, since the beginning of the pandemic, they have faced the same challenges as everyone else trying to find balance in new ways of life. Anxiety, fear, worry, shock, and sadness were the most frequently mentioned feelings of more than 5,000 teachers and leaders and administrators in the United States at the end of March 2020 [15]. Also, according to research conducted by Pažur, Domović, and Kovač [16] a high correlation was established between teachers' perceptions of democratic school leadership and democratic school culture, i.e., some aspects of the effect of the principal's democratic school leadership on the development of democratic school culture were explained, which was also confirmed in our research.

## 5 CONCLUSION

The pandemic undoubtedly brought about significant changes in the context of educational processes, but not all of them were necessarily of a negative nature. According to the results of our research, the Covid-19 pandemic had a significant impact on the organizational culture of the primary school and was reflected in the organization of work and teaching, which, viewed as a whole, preserved the same efficiency as before the pandemic itself. Working in the conditions of a pandemic for the school team certainly has more negative aspects, but overall, it is not a sign of a negative experience - it did not create a disruption of relationships, did not threaten a positive working environment, atmosphere, communication, and cooperation. To that extent, the results of our research represent a contribution to the research of the teaching process during the pandemic with an emphasis on school culture and its features in changed circumstances. The findings can also contribute to future reflections regarding the concepts, role and importance of creating, shaping and maintaining a positive school culture, which is largely responsible for the successful functioning of the teaching process during the pandemic. Overall, the crisis

produced the need to formulate a clearer attitude about the role and purpose of schools in society, as well as the need for a more systematic reflection on the social role and importance of teachers, teachers, and educators. When it comes to the limitations of the research, they primarily stem from the fact that the research covered one elementary school from the Split-Dalmatia County area, and the possibility of a comparative insight into the change in organizational culture on a wider sample was missing. Therefore, the recommendation for future research is to include a more representative sample, which would more systematically investigate the changes that the COVID-19 pandemic has produced in the context of organizational culture, which will make the guidelines for future reflections as well as concrete actions in terms of shaping and supporting the concept of a positive organizational culture more systematic and conceptually determined.

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