



EXPLORING CURRENT TRENDS IN EDUCATION: A REVIEW OF RESEARCH TOPICS IN THE PROBLEMS OF EDUCATION IN THE 21ST CENTURY JOURNAL

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Abstract

Scientific journals play a critical role in disseminating knowledge, and staying up to date with research findings in a particular field can be challenging given the vast number of journals and research topics available. Therefore, there is a need for researchers to occasionally summarize the main research topics in order to help fellow researchers navigate the contents more effectively. In this context, this article aims to review the research topics published in the Problems of Education in the 21st Century journal between 2018 and 2022. A total of 285 abstracts were retrieved from the Web of Science database and analyzed to identify the most common research topics and the contributing countries. The top 10 research topics identified were self-efficacy, distance education, professional development, critical thinking, foreign language, thinking skills, Covid-19, academic achievement, emotional intelligence, and special education. The authors of the papers came from 62 countries, with most of the papers coming from Türkiye, South Africa, Indonesia, Brazil, Slovakia, Czech Republic, Malaysia, Sweden, Lithuania, and Serbia. In conclusion, this study highlights the relevance and diversity of research topics in the Problems of Education in the 21st Century journal, underscoring the need for a nuanced, context-specific approach to education research. The findings of this study have important implications for researchers, policymakers, and educators seeking to address the key challenges and opportunities facing education in the 21st century.

Keywords: content analysis, scientific journals, Problems of Education in the 21st Century, research topics

Introduction

Due to its complex and multifaceted nature, the field of education is packed with various challenges. The opinions on the goals of education vary both within the field of education and among broader society. What should be the goal of education is a matter of different viewpoints. Should the focus of schools be on democratic equality (preparing citizens), social efficiency (training workers), social mobility (preparing individuals to compete for social positions) or on something else is a matter of great debate (Labaree, 1997). Add to these diverse perspectives of stakeholders involved in the field, political and ideological differences, new technologies, and one can only grasp a part of the challenges in education. These challenges need to be addressed through the science and rigorous research, which might help in finding the best answers to these questions. This research and new knowledge should find its place in scientific journals.

Scientific journals are the most important source of knowledge in any scientific field, including education. Scientific journals are the best way to disseminate research findings and advance the scientific knowledge in any field (Leta, 2012). Scientific article writing is an integral part of academic activity, and publishing in science journals is crucial for researchers to demonstrate the value of their work and make it understandable to both the academic community and society as a whole, regardless of the type of publication (Lamanauskas, 2019).

In particular, educational journals play a crucial role in advancing the field of education and serve as an excellent platform for sharing research with a wider audience (Cook-Sather, 2002). These journals are important not only for scientists, but also for the practitioners, as they often contain up-to-date knowledge on practices that are relevant to practical work. Research has shown that teachers are willing to use research as it provides support and assists them in dealing with new educational challenges (Sato & Loewen, 2019). Additionally, journals play a role in fostering collaboration and exchange among scholars and practitioners (Bonwell & Eison, 1991). Although at face value it may not appear so, educational research is difficult to conduct, or in other words, it is “the hardest science of all” (Berliner, 2002). Authors have identified numerous factors for why conducting educational research is so complex. Some of these factors are related to the complexity of the educational systems (Erçetin et al., 2015), ethical considerations (Head, 2020), and resistance to change (Head, 2020). Educational researchers need to properly address these and other challenges, and in turn, through their published work, help improve the educational systems throughout the world.

There are literally thousands of academic journals around the world that cover various educational research. The exact number is hard to determine as new journals are continually being established, and some journals are discontinued. However, in all cases, scientists, and practitioners alike, should rely on the information published in reputable journals and avoid untrustworthy journals. Reputable journals are indexed in major scientific databases such as ERIC, Scopus, PsychInfo, and Web of Science (WOS). The WOS is a research database that provides access to high-quality, scholarly research in all fields of science. Researchers can use WOS to find the most relevant and up-to-date information on a particular topic. The WOS database applies rigorous selection criteria and indexes only high-quality, peer-reviewed publications.

One of the educational journals that is indexed in WOS is the journal Problems of Education in the 21st Century (PEC). It is an international scientific journal published by SCIENTIA SOCIALIS in Lithuania. Given the relative paucity of educational journals indexed in WOS from Eastern Europe, we wanted to perform a content analysis of the articles that were published in PEC. A qualitative approach was employed as qualitative studies are gaining momentum in social sciences. Qualitative studies can be defined as a systematic approach to understanding the quality of certain phenomena within a particular context (Brantlinger et al., 2005). Content analysis is one of the techniques within the qualitative research framework and represents a flexible method for analyzing different contents, but is primarily used for text analysis (Cavanagh, 1997). It can be used to examine the frequency and context of specific topics or words in a large volume of data (Krippendorff, 2018). By conducting a content analysis of the articles published in PEC between 2018 and 2022, this study offers valuable insights into the most studied research topics and contributing countries in this journal. Moreover, by employing a qualitative approach and specifically using content analysis as a research method, this study highlights the flexibility and usefulness of qualitative research techniques in the field of education. Additionally, this is the first paper to qualitatively explore topics in the Problems of Education in the 21st Century Journal. This study is of great importance for advancing the understanding of education research and for informing policy and practice in the field. Thus, the aim of the present study was to examine the most frequent research topics published in the PEC journal.

Research Methodology

Data Collection

This study belongs to the descriptive content analysis (Calik & Sözbilir, 2014). The WOS database was used to extract the information for the article information published in the PEC journal. A similar methodology was previously used in analyzing the contents published in the area of argumentation, chemistry and autism journals (Bağ & Çalık, 2017; Çalık & Wiyarsi, 2021; Memisevic & Djipa, 2022). All articles that were published from 2018 to 2022, indexed in WOS on 31 January were included in the study. A 5-year timeframe was used due to the relevance of research, as it is a relatively recent period, and by focusing on articles published within that time, one can gain insight into current research trends and topics that are most relevant to the current state of education.

Data Analysis

There were 285 such articles and the following information was extracted for each article: 1. Title of the article, 2. Country of the corresponding author, and 3. Abstract. From the analysis output, two categories were made. The first is related to the research topic. Phrases that contain two or more words were extracted, and meaningful research topics were manually selected. The first and third authors of this study were involved in the data extraction and analysis process. They independently extracted research topics and there was only one discrepancy in extracted topics, which was resolved through discussion and consensus.

The second category was related to the subjects (participants) of the studies. Again, the first and third authors of this study were involved in the data extraction and there were no discrepancies between the raters. The data were analyzed with the R computer program (R Core Team, 2021). In addition to this, information regarding the country of origin of the corresponding author was extracted as a proxy for geographical contribution to the PEC.

Research Results

The most common research topics published in the PEC were first presented. These results are presented in Table 1. The frequency of studies in relation to the participants of the research is presented in Table 2.

Table 1
The 15 Most Common Research Topics Published in the PEC

| Research topic | Frequency* |
|--------------------------|------------|
| Self-efficacy | 30 |
| Distance education | 29 |
| Professional development | 21 |
| Critical thinking | 20 |
| Foreign language | 18 |
| Thinking skills | 18 |
| Covid-19 | 16 |
| Academic achievement | 14 |
| Emotional intelligence | 14 |
| Special education | 12 |
| Physical activity | 12 |
| Mathematics teaching | 12 |
| Risky sexual behavior | 11 |
| Second language | 10 |
| Financial literacy | 9 |

Note. *Frequency refers to the number of times the term appeared in the Abstracts. It does not necessarily correspond to the number of articles.

Table 2
Frequency of Terms Related to the Category Participants

| Participants | Frequency* |
|---------------------------|------------|
| Preservice teachers | 52 |
| Primary school students | 29 |
| University students | 22 |
| Secondary school students | 18 |
| Preschool teachers | 17 |
| School teachers | 17 |
| Science teachers | 11 |
| Novice teachers | 9 |
| High-school students | 8 |
| Prospective teachers | 8 |

Note. *Frequency refers to the number of times the term appeared in the Abstracts. It does not necessarily correspond to the number of articles.

In total, authors from 62 countries contributed to the papers published in PEC in this time frame, making it a truly global educational journal. These countries spanned five continents,

including North America, South America, Europe, Asia, and Africa. This broad range of geographical representation underscores the journal's international reach and the diverse perspectives it offers on issues in education. These results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3
Corresponding Author's Country

| Country | Number of articles |
|----------------|--------------------|
| Turkiye | 31 |
| South Africa | 27 |
| Indonesia | 18 |
| Brazil | 17 |
| Slovakia | 17 |
| Czech Republic | 16 |
| Malaysia | 15 |
| Sweden | 10 |
| Lithuania | 9 |
| Serbia | 9 |

Discussion

The aim of the present review was to examine the most frequent research topics in the PEC. The most frequent research topic was self-efficacy. This is not surprising given that self-efficacy was among the top 10 research topics in autism journals as well (Memisevic & Djipa, 2022). Articles published in PEC regarding self-efficacy dealt with its different aspects. For example, one study examined whether the paradigm of good teaching dimensions can predict students' self-efficacy in e-learning (Davidovitch & Yavich, 2022). The authors concluded that self-efficacy rose with age and years of schooling. Another study was dealing with motivational factors that play a role in the learning process, including self-efficacy (Gomes de Freitas et al., 2020). Again, motivation seemed to increase during the course and was mainly driven by internal factors. In an interesting study by Hassan (2019), the author examined the effects of teachers' self-efficacy on students' achievement scores. The author found that teachers' self-efficacy had a huge impact on students' success, explaining as much as 65% of students' achievement scores. Lastly, there is a study by Dofková (2019) on the level of self-efficacy among primary pre-service teachers of mathematics. In this study, the author used a newly developed research tool named *Self-Efficacy of Prospective Teachers in Mathematics* which contains 37 items. The study's result showed that prospective teachers assess their readiness for teaching in a positive manner, and they trust their own abilities to apply various methods and procedures.

The next topic on the list was the topic of distance education. In the article by de Oliveira Durso and Arruda (2022), the authors examined the effects of artificial intelligence (AI) on distance learning. In conclusion, the authors stress the need for wider application of AI in distance education, given the number of students who enroll in Brazilian higher education institutions. The pandemic of COVID-19 opened the way for more studies regarding distance education. Researchers in Serbia have evaluated the quality of distance education during the COVID-19 pandemic in a sample of Serbian citizens (Krstić & Radulović, 2021). The authors found that certain modalities of distance education have received a very positive evaluation

(Google Classroom, Google Meet, Zoom). The authors have pointed out that citizens in Serbia feel that distance education is useful as it enables efficient learning-teaching processes. Distance education was also evaluated from the teachers' point of view (Mikušková & Verešová, 2020). The authors found that the negative emotions of teachers increased during the pandemic, and that distance education was closely related to emotions and personality.

The third most frequent research topic was professional development. In a study by Tran et al. (2020), the authors pointed out that professional development plays a crucial role in enhancing student achievement and impacts educational quality. Professional development is considered to be a key measure in successfully implementing educational reforms including the curriculum, teaching methodology, and textbook replacement. In conclusion, the authors stated that both principals and teachers regard professional development to be highly important for the educational improvement. In a study conducted in Malaysia, the authors have examined the effects of the 16-hour professional development workshop aimed at resolving conflicts at the workplace (Siew & Jones, 2018). Positive attitudes towards professional development were found to be beneficiary in resolving work-related conflict situations along with other factors such as culturally relevant negotiations, stakeholder and conflict analysis, and reflecting on personal conflict management styles.

The next topic on the list was critical thinking. Critical thinking is crucial to education. It can be defined as the process of actively and objectively analyzing information, arguments, or data to form a judgement or solve a problem. Critical thinking involves questioning assumptions, reasoning logically, and considering multiple perspectives (Fisher, 2011). An interesting study published in the PEC dealt with the uncertainty of Saudi teachers on how to include critical thinking into their classrooms (Alharbi, 2022). However, the results of this study revealed that the knowledge of critical thinking was high among Saudi teachers, and their attitudes towards improving students' critical thinking were positive. Another study focused on architectural faculty students and the importance of critical thinking for their profession (Kiliçaslan, 2018). One of the conclusions that the authors reached was that all students needed guidance to attach importance to critical thinking starting from the first year of the faculty program.

The fifth-ranked research topic was a foreign language. Many different studies were conducted in relation to this research topic. A study conducted in Indonesia explored the anxiety faced by students when writing in English (Mulyono et al., 2020). Given that students face moderate levels of anxiety, the authors suggest that there is a need to help students develop a positive perception of their writing in a foreign language, besides their content knowledge in writing skills. Another study on foreign languages comes from Libya (Owen et al., 2019). In this study, the authors stressed the importance of the English language as it became essential in all disciplines. In line with this, the authors examined the effects of the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach on Libyan students' English-speaking performance. The authors concluded that implementing communicative activities based on the principles of CLT in the Libyan English language classroom helps enhance students' English-speaking performance.

The next frequent research topic was thinking skills. It is closely related to the previously mentioned critical thinking, but we decided to treat it as a different topic, as it is found in different studies. A rationale for one study was the weak performance of Indonesian students in TIMSS and PISA international assessments (Hadi et al., 2018) which might be an indicator of their low performance on higher-order thinking skills. The authors reported that the prevalence level of difficulties in comprehension was around 8.3%, 15.59% of students had difficulties in transformation, 32.53% in process skills, and 1.34 % in encoding. In an interesting study by Özgenel et al. (2019), the authors have examined the effects of training given to preschool children on their creative thinking skills. The results revealed that enriched workshop training has developed students' creative thinking skills positively.

The seventh-ranked research topic was COVID-19. The pandemic of Covid 19 has affected all domains of life, including health, safety, and well-being of individuals (insecurity, emotional isolation, stigma) and communities (economic loss, school closures) (Betty & North Carol, 2020). In addition, the pandemic had a detrimental effect on the mental health of teachers (Kovac et al., 2021). The topic of COVID-19 has appeared in different contexts. We have already referenced some studies that were dealing with distance education because of the pandemic. COVID-19 had affected all areas of education, but it probably had the greatest negative impact on special education. That was the topic of a study by Givigi et al. (2022), in which the authors compared services in Canada and Brazil. In both these countries children with disabilities were in a difficult situation due to social isolation. However, Canada provided more support services to families and students than Brazil.

Next on the list was the topic of academic achievement. One study explored the explicative model of academic achievement (de la Iglesia & Castro Solano, 2019). It was found that myriad factors can affect academic achievements, such as mental health and academic adjustment. Thus, positive personality traits play an important role in academic outcomes, besides content knowledge. In one study conducted in Zambia, authors explored the benefits of cooperative learning on students' academic achievement and attitude towards mathematics (Mukuka et al., 2019), as the cooperative learning has been a challenge in many schools. The authors found that the majority of participants preferred expository teaching to cooperative learning. Data showed that more than 64% of the participants indicated that they resisted implementing cooperative learning in their classrooms due to various factors such as: assessing learners, ensuring a disciplined class environment, completing syllabus, large classes, etc.

The ninth topic on the list was emotional intelligence. Ever since psychologist Daniel Goleman coined up the term "emotional intelligence" (Goleman, 1995), the interest in this topic has grown tremendously. The concept of emotional intelligence pertains to an individual's capacity to identify, comprehend, and regulate their own emotions, as well as those of others. It involves the capacity for empathy, self-awareness, self-regulation, and the ability to build positive relationships. Research into this topic is also quite wide. Some researchers explored the relationship between emotional intelligence and academic achievement (AL-Qadri & Zhao, 2021). The authors have found a statistically significant correlation between emotional intelligence and academic achievement. Whether cognitive flexibility can be predicted by emotional intelligence and self-leadership was explored in a study by Kösterelioğlu (2021). The author concluded that both emotional intelligence and self-leadership can predict cognitive flexibility. The study's findings suggested that enhancing administrators' emotional intelligence and self-leadership awareness through training and practice can influence the development of their cognitive flexibility skills.

The final topic that will be covered in this short overview of the main research topics in PEC is special education. Its complexity and variability of students that require special education make additional demands for teachers who are individualizing and adapting curriculum to suit every child's needs. Teachers are required to use evidence-based treatments in their work with students with disabilities, including children with autistic spectrum disorder (Mursi & Sulaimani, 2022). That study indicated that teachers are not familiar with evidence-based practices, and they often regard their own teaching methods as evidence-based. The authors point to the need of bridging the theory to practice gap in special education. Another study was aimed at exploring teachers' preparedness to teach students with special education needs (Holmqvist et al., 2019). The results of this study are related to the professional development of teachers. The teachers who had mandatory courses on how to teach students with special educational needs showed higher self-rated competence.

Articles published in the PEC journal have also demonstrated a wide range of participants involved in the studies. Although most of the studies dealt with pre-service teachers, numerous

studies covered participants in all educational stages, from kindergarten to university, and both students and their teachers. Additionally, scientific contributions to PEC come almost equally from developed countries as well as developing countries, which makes it being recognized as a genuinely global educational journal.

Content analysis of research topics is an important endeavor as it helps to identify educational trends and potential research directions. In this study, several of the most common topics that were published in the PEC were explored. This kind of study also has some limitations that need to be mentioned. To begin with, the authors' subjective judgment played a role in identifying the ten most frequent research topics in the study's description. Not all references to the published papers on the certain research topic could be made and probably the selection of articles would be different if the other authors conducted the analysis. Second, the selection of research topics was performed manually among the numerous terms and some two-word phrases that could be regarded as research topics might have been omitted from this review. Finally, as in any content analysis study, content analysis may not be able to capture all aspects of a complex issue or phenomenon. However, the hope is that this short overview of topics published in the PEC would be useful to other researchers and might inspire them to conduct these kinds of exploratory studies.

Conclusions and Implications

Content analysis is an objective and systematic method for exploring, evaluating, and summarizing research topics within a particular field. By conducting a content analysis of abstracts published in the Problems of Education in the 21st Century journal between 2018 and 2022, this study has provided insights into the most frequent research topics and contributing countries in the field of education. The findings reveal that self-efficacy, distance education, professional development, critical thinking, foreign language, thinking skills, Covid-19, academic achievement, emotional intelligence, and special education are among the most commonly studied topics in this journal. Additionally, authors from 62 countries have contributed to the journal, highlighting its global reach and significance.

These findings have several implications for researchers, policymakers, and educators in the field of education. For researchers, this study provides a comprehensive overview of the research topics that have been studied in the Problems of Education in the 21st Century journal over the past five years. These findings can inform future research directions and help researchers identify potential gaps in the literature that need to be addressed. Policymakers and educators can also use this information to inform their decisions about educational policy and practice and to stay up-to-date on the latest research trends and topics. Future research should aim to explore larger units of analysis, such as the full text of the articles, to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the research topics and findings in this field.

Declaration of Interest

The authors declare no competing interest.

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