PROBLEMY WCZESNEJ EDUKACJI / ISSUES IN EARLY EDUCATION
2 (57) / 2023
ISSN 1734-1582
ISSN 2451-2230 (online)

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https://doi.org/10.26881/pwe.2023.57.08

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Positive experiences of distance education from the perspective of primary school pupils, grades I–III

Summary

The article refers to a broader research project on how the COVID-19 pandemic affected everyday school life during distance education in grades I–III of primary school. The empirical data collected in 2021 were based on focus interviews with pupils in six primary schools. In our quantitative analysis of the data, we concentrated on the pupils whose experiences of distance learning during the pandemic were perceived – by the pupils – as positive. These experiences were primarily the effect of students being in a comfortable home and virtual space. In both spaces, compared to education within the walls of a school, firstly, students had a wider range of different activities possible to undertake, and secondly, the teacher's directive nature in the learning process was limited. As a result, conditions were created for the formation of student agency and autonomy, while at the same time posing as learning, hiding from the teacher, or "pretending" to fulfill school duties.

Keywords: distance learning, pandemic COVID-19, autonomy, subjectivity, early education, school experiences

Słowa kluczowe: edukacja zdalna, pandemia COVID-19, autonomia, podmiotowość, edukacja wczesnoszkolna, doświadczenia szkolne

Benefits of distance education

At the beginning of 2022, along with lifting almost two-year-long restrictions introduced with regard to the threat of spreading of the SARS-CoV-2 virus, the process started of creating a post-pandemic 'new normal' in all areas of life, including education. Scientists have been taking it upon themselves to summarise the results of research conducted in the last two years of the pandemic in order to show, describe and assess implementation of

distance teaching, by presenting the perspective of teachers, parents and pupils themselves (Adrjan, Koterwas 2021; Dąbrowska 2021; Pyżalski, Walter 2021; Kalinowska 2022; Nowak-Fabrykowski 2022), as well as by proposing recommendations based on the findings.

Many publications devoted to distance education have been written which present the technical, social and emotional consequences of teaching during the pandemic (Ptaszek et al. 2020; Całek 2021; Czapliński et al. 2021). These consequences are predominantly perceived pejoratively. Decidedly less attention is paid to the benefits of distance education. Studies devoted to this topic present benefits from the perspective of recipients thereof: pupils, teachers and parents adapting to new conditions of everyday life at schools, or depict them in more global terms as an effect of social reflection on the function of the school and its significance for the cultural and economic development of the country (Bałachowicz 2022: 110).

From the perspective of teachers, the positive consequences of distance education are related to the economic issue in the context of both time and finance. They underline the comfort of working in various places and the freedom from the necessity to perform supervision duties during breaks. The custodial and educational values indicated by the teachers included the greater openness of shyer students resulting from functioning online (Plebańska et al. 2020) and the possibility of observing children's needs and their household environment as well as having better contact with parents. Furthermore, teachers indicated development of their own digital competences, establishing "a cooperation network" with other teachers online, professional and personal development (Łukasik et al. 2020). In the context of teaching work they emphasised the possibility of individualising the methods and pace of learning, as well as the access to unlimited educational resources in the form of online galleries, digital educational materials (Plebańska et al. 2020). Another issue comprises new manners of organising classes, in the form of, among others, hybrid education, which has been permanently included in everyday educational practice, thus expanding a classroom with a new virtual space (Pyżalski, Walter 2021; Yetkiner 2021).

Studies conducted by the Public Opinion Research Centre show that positive consequences of distance education are noticed by every fourth parent. Apart from the epidemiological safety, parents also listed development of digital competences among children, saving time and money due to the isolation at home, closer contact with a child and greater freedom during a lesson and thus lower levels of learning-induced stress among children (Omyła-Rudzka 2021). Furthermore, the nature of cooperation with parents changed, and the relationship between the school and the child's family was closer (Łukasik et al. 2020).

According to pupils, an advantage of a distance education primarily consists in saving time due to the lack of the necessity to commute to a school. This time can be spent on developing their own interests. Moreover, pupils enumerated such positive aspects as: higher comfort, lower stress, possibility of adjusting learning to their own pace, learning 'mobility' and unlimited access to educational materials online (Plebańska et al. 2020). A year after the outbreak of the pandemic, the percentage of pupils who believe that, in contrast to the times before the pandemic, they have been achieving better learning results, has increased. Also the way in which students spend free time has improved (Jaskulska et al. 2021).

Furthermore, it is worth citing results of research on well-being in the educational environment. Although, consequent to limited peer contact or permanent fear of falling ill, well-being in general has significantly deteriorated in comparison with teachers and parents, pupils have least often indicated a worsening of their physical and mental health (Ptaszek et al. 2020). The change resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic proved to be the least severe for pupils. Every third studied pupil preferred to continue learning in the distance education model (Jaskulska et al. 2021). These results have shown that despite negative consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, pupils themselves quickly adapt to new conditions. It can serve as evidence to the success of distance education, which limits the unpleasant experiences of intramural education.

Given these premises, we propose to study the benefits of distance education in the evaluation of pupils who have been directly subject to the effects thereof. The aim of the paper is to present experiences of pupils in the first and third grades of elementary school during online lessons that they have evaluated positively. Qualitative research was conducted at the turn of May and June 2021, that is, after over a year of experience gained by the respondents with regard to COVID-19 pandemic-related restrictions. In the first part of the analysis we will focus on positive experiences resulting from home and online spaces occupied by pupils during distance education, whereas the second part will concern autonomy and agency established in the new educational conditions.

Methodology

The presented research is a fragment of a more extensive project titled "Changes in the Educational Environment in Distance Learning – Experiencing Everyday Life in School by Children in Grades I–III", implemented by the Elementary Education Team (operating at the Elementary Education Section of the Committee of Pedagogical Sciences)[1]. The research project received a positive opinion of the Committee for Scientific Research Ethics at the Faculty of Education and Psychology of the Jan Kochanowski University of Kielce (no. 1/2021). The research was of a qualitative nature and was located in the social constructivism and symbolic interactionism paradigm. The aim of our research was to describe positive experiences regarding distance education in the children's discourse of everyday life in schools. Children as active subjects, direct recipients of everyday life in schools created in the new conditions, were a reliable and valuable source of information.

[1] Composition of the project team: Zuzanna Zbróg, PhD, DSc, Jan Kochanowski University of Kielce (lider); Józefa Bałachowicz, Professor, The Maria Grzegorzewska University; Jolanta Bonar, PhD, DSc, University of Lodz; Małgorzata Głoskowska-Sołdatow, PhD, DSc, University of Bialystok; Janina Uszyńska-Jarmoc, PhD, DSc, University of Bialystok; Edyta Nowosielska, PhD, The Maria Grzegorzewska University; Aldona Kopik, PhD, Jan Kochanowski University of Kielce; Agnieszka Koterwas, PhD, The Maria Grzegorzewska University; Anna Witkowska-Tomaszewska, PhD, The Maria Grzegorzewska University.

Studies conducted with children do not require developing special methods tailored to a given age category (Gawlicz, Röhrborn 2014: 19). It is the most important to select methods, which by referring to children's means of expression will allow disclosing their perspective. The used research method constituted focus group interviews during which respondents had the opportunity to give their own opinions and listen to opinions of other people, and to confront or combine various opinions (Kubiak 2007). Focus, since devoted to specific areas of research interests concerning pupils' experiences of distance education. To this end, an author's tool in the form of an interview questionnaire was established. The research was supplemented by using a projection technique in the form of a star of associations. The pupils' task consisted in indicating what they associate distance education with and what they associate school education with.

The research was participated in by 5 six-person groups of first graders and 5 six-person groups of third graders. Research was conducted in selected elementary schools in four Polish cities available to the field researchers. Since it was important to capture in the research the most important differences in experiencing educational everyday life by younger and older children, it was purposefully planned not to conduct research in second grade, in order to ensure that differences in terms of age were more visible.

The research was of a transversal nature – all groups were studied at a similar time – at the turn of May and June 2021 in direct contact, in compliance with all required by the law precautions and sanitary safety rules.

Home and online space instead of school walls

The starting point for the conducted analysis will be a description of pupils' positive experiences in the context of pupils' space during distance education. Space is a very universal concept, thus the plurality of its definitions (Kaczmarek 2005: 17). Bohdan Jałowiecki presents various views of this concept: "Space is an abstract idea (mathematical), a property of matter (physical). A natural environment developed in a specific manner in the course of evolution (natural, geographic), and finally, it is a human, anthropogenic, cultural and social creation, thus, it is created by individuals, groups and communities (social, cultural)" (2002: 301). For us, the most important element of this definition comprises viewing space as a human-created environment, but also as a new learning environment created by overlapping offline and online worlds. During distance learning, for children space referred not to the space at school but the space at home. School was slowly 'emerging' in children's homes in the form of distance education. School and home spaces merged and the children's task was to adapt household spheres, rooms and activities, to school spaces.

Home space is a very broad category, therefore, for the purposes of the paper, we selected only three aspects thereof, most frequently associated with by children, that is: things, activities, places.

Things:

> I have a large desk, a lot of things can fit in there. I always have a pile of drawings and pieces of paper, so when I was bored during distance classes, I was simply drawing (3rd grade).
>
> I could play with things that I do not have at school, and at school there are hardly any cool toys. I could simply go and play with any toys during breaks (3rd grade).
>
> I could have food, Inka coffee, tea or cocoa on my desk (3rd grade).
>
> I have a computer on my desk, which is great (1st grade).

In the above statements, while talking about space children usually enumerate things, e.g., desks and what is placed on them: "a pile of pieces of paper," "a lot of markers," "crayons," "tea," "Inka coffee," "food," "toys," "a computer." These are usually things that they cannot have on their school desks, therefore they consider having them on their home desks to be a great advantage of distance education.

Various activities they can perform during distance classes or breaks:

> You can walk around the home, when you do not connect to all classes, talk to mum and dad, parents or sister (3rd grade).
>
> The fact that during breaks, you could climb into bed (3rd grade).
>
> During breaks, you could play a little, go to mum and ask for food (3rd grade).
>
> During distance lessons, you could eat something, look at someone playing a game or rest outside (1st grade).

On the one hand, activities that are mentioned by children concerned entertainment, but on the other hand, satisfying basic needs such as rest or food. On the basis of presented statements, one can conclude that if these activities were allowed in a school, unconditioned, as for instance in the case of food, by the time of breaks, children would not have indicated them as a value of distance education. "Playing games," "walking around the classroom," "eating and drinking" during lessons is forbidden in traditional schools. And yet, properly adjusted, they should become a part of any lesson.

Places, where they could study remotely:

> Room, kitchen, living room, hall and dressing room – that is almost the entire home apart from the basement (1st grade).
>
> Once I connected in a car (1st grade).
>
> On the balcony, terrace (3rd grade).

Home was not the only place where children could study remotely. The time of distance education showed that the learning process can proceed in many places. Children appreciated the fact that they could join distance lessons in various places. It is not, however, an answer to postulates proposed by educators regarding the need to organise conditions for learning outside school walls or evidence that learning can happen at any place and time. Teaching is designed so that the place where pupils stay during education is insignificant. It is important for the pupil to be equipped with technology to connect with the teacher and peers in order to copy familiar patterns of school interactions that do not differ from a traditional lesson within school walls.

Participation in classes by synchronously connecting with the teacher during a lesson resulted in pupils finding themselves in new, hitherto unknown conditions in the **online space**. The approach to the online space constitutes an important point of children's education processes. Children know that they can talk to someone who is in another area of the space (teachers, peers), and even to someone they have never seen before. They also know that performing a given activity does not automatically mean that the result is visible at the same place and time (Löw 2021: 103). A question can be asked here: Can pupils form on this basis a perception of homogenous space surrounding them? Martina Löw (2021: 103) justly writes that in a virtual space, the perception of space can be disturbed, and boundaries between real and virtual words are blurred on a large scale.

Children's statements show their fascination with distance classes with the use of various applications, programmes or communicators, which they did not have contact with during IT education in school. It is shown by the statements below:

> It is so cool, because you are not bored to death and you can use a filter (C1: but the teacher does not allow this). Sure, but it is so cool (1st grade).
>
> During breaks chatting, playing with the microphone, switching off Staś' webcam, because he had it on all the time and the fact that you can go to your brother and watch him playing games (1st grade).
>
> We use various fun websites, e.g., Wordwall, Matzoo and others,' we prepare presentations on a computer, in PowerPoint (3rd grade).
>
> We have everything on Padlet, we can always go back (3rd grade).

Some children participating in the study enjoyed distance learning a lot, since they were learning differently, in a different space, with the use of new tools, applications or programmes. In school children miss this safe and private space (Nalaskowski 2002: 58). And if they do find it, they cannot explore it fully. Private space is a shelter for them, a safe space where they can feel at ease, and at the same time escape school formality.

Experiencing pupil's autonomy instead of teacher's constant control

During distance education, a family home was usually the place where children were learning and synchronically connecting with the teacher. In the domestic comfort space, a pupil connected with a teacher via mobile devices. In such conditions the directive style of a teacher's work was limited and gave more freedom to pupils. Children had the opportunity to decide on activities performed at a given time to a significantly larger extent than within school walls. In school, the role of a pupil subordinated to school rules is visible, whereas, at home children's qualities are more visible – a child as an autonomous subject managing their own time and capable of making decisions.

Pupils feel an exceptional need to free themselves from institutional oppression. Institutional oppression is depicted by the statement given by one of the pupils comparing online classes to intramural classes:

> During intramural classes you cannot cheat that you are not present during a lesson, **you cannot do anything** (3rd grade).

Positive experiences during distance education are predominantly the effect of pupils' autonomy. This autonomy was not included in the **planned curriculum** (Eisner 1994) in the form of deliberate intentions of the teacher (for instance, using strategies of differentiation or scaffolding, within which pupils have a pool of tasks to choose from within specific frameworks (Wood et al. 1986). Autonomy was implemented at an informal level, within the **experimental curriculum**, that is, a curriculum that is actually experienced by pupils, often as a result of a rebellion against school oppression and boredom:

> During distance education I could play instead of being bored at school (3rd grade).
>
> When I was very bored at a lesson, I used to take a piece of paper and draw – it was the best (3rd grade).
>
> I was playing the fool and fell from the chair a thousand times… (laughter) (1st grade).

An alternative to school apathy experienced during online classes consisted in creating a parallel reality by the students. Children enthusiastically recalled situations when they had the possibility to manage their time during online lessons independently:

> During distance education you can sleep more, get up, turn on the computer and you are already at a lesson (1st grade).
>
> **You can** go to the fridge anytime and eat what you want (3rd grade).
>
> You **can** actually take frequent breaks (3rd grade).
>
> I **could** turn on the computer and play at any time (3rd grade).

> You **can** eat something, watch someone play a game or rest outside (1st grade).
>
> During distance education you **can** sleep more, you **can** be happy that you do not have to connect to all lessons, you **can** walk around the house when you do not connect to all lessons, talk to mum, dad, parents, or sister (3rd grade).

Pupils treat the possibility of performing various activities as an advantage of distance education, while being aware that it would be impossible in a school setting. Children reported that in order to prepare for intramural school they have to get up much earlier, get dressed, take care of their hygiene, which takes more time than preparing for remote school, with which you can connect a minute before classes, whereas during lessons within school walls they have to perform activities planned by the teacher or activities resulting from conforming to the imposed school schedule, which is evidenced by another statement given by one of the respondents.

> But when I was normally at school, we **had** to do what the entire class did, for example go outside, and at home, if I did not want to go outside, I could, for example, play with my brother (1st grade).

In the quotes provided in this part of the paper we emphasised the frequency of using modal verbs such as: **we could**, **I could**, **can**, which were used in the context of experiencing distance education, and **we had to**, **you have to**, which were used in the context of intramural education. It happened that within one statement students contrasted these experiences, emphasising a greater choice offered by education in home conditions.

We are aware that these statements can be interpreted differently in the context of the purposes of socialisation and upbringing. We can, therefore, ask an open question about the limited possibilities of children during distance education to use their resources in the cognitive and upbringing context. During early school education children require special educational support in joining co-upbringing and self-upbringing processes. The quality of this support will determine later attempts related to self-creation and extending the space of individual independence, making their own choices and possibilities of conscious and responsible behaviour (Bałachowicz 2009: 311). Thus understood, educational support was missing during distance education. Online lessons were organised by teachers in a way making it impossible for children to "test their competences in the scope of setting objectives, planning, solving problems, negotiating solutions or facing difficult challenges" (Bednarska 2021: 183). Performed activities were rather aimed at entertainment or satisfaction of basic needs rather than education. During distance classes children could not be the creators of their own activities in the educational context, and their role boiled down to meeting teachers' expectations or simulating meeting them, the impossibility to take on challenges, plan or solve problems.

Autonomy was achievable by a series of various strategies and resulted from a student staying at home and in the online space, out of the teacher's sight. One of such strategies

consisted in cheating or "departing from the truth," referred to by the students as **pretending**. The verb to pretend was many times used in children's statements:

> You could **pretend** that there is no Internet, **pretend** that you cannot turn on the sound or webcam. None of that. And then you could play instead of listening. Sometimes I did not open a book at all, and I was simply lying down. Once I fell asleep during a lesson. And the teacher asked: "Hello, N."? The teacher thought I had no Internet (3rd grade).
>
> Or, for example, someone does not want to participate in a lesson so they later **pretend** that they were late or turn off the microphone and sound… (1st grade).
>
> I sometimes explained to the teacher that I could not connect and (…) sometimes I explained, because sometimes I did not feel like connecting, I waited 12 minutes and explained that the Internet broke down (3rd grade).

The second strategy involved hiding from the webcam view:

> If someone did not want to do push-ups, they **could hide** behind a desk so that he could not be seen (1st grade).
>
> That I can silently, **in secret, turn the webcam off** during a film and go out, because the teacher always asks us to turn off webcams, and when there was a film we did not enjoy, we **could** do something else. When it ended, you had to turn the webcam on and come quickly (1st grade).
>
> One time **I turned off the webcam, put on rollerblades** and I was skating around the room during a lesson. It was fun (1st grade).
>
> For example, during remote lessons, if someone did not learn for the test, they **put a sticker on the webcam** and you could see nothing and say that it was turned off (1st grade).

Disturbances on the line between the teacher and the pupil during mediated learning did not always result from technical issues, but was a deliberate intention of a student who "in velvet gloves" created a parallel reality, which was attractive for them, by simulating performance of duties resulting from the role of a pupil.

The same situation presents itself in the context of verifying knowledge during tests or exams. Even first graders referred to unfair practices in this scope.

> Remote, remote, remote, remote – we prefer remote tests – they are easier, you **can cheat**, and they require less writing (3rd grade).
>
> For example, you turn on the webcam and you have to write a test, so you turn the webcam off and look at cribs (1st grade).
>
> When there is a test you cannot cheat anymore, as you **could while sitting in front of a computer at home** (1st grade).
>
> During distance education, you **could have cribs** on the phone, and now, at school – you cannot (1st grade).

Cheating, which was possible in home conditions and favourable for creating a parallel reality, was perceived as a value of distance education. Thus, school education can seem to be cognitively barren, consisting in surviving rather than taking on intellectual activities.

Discrepancy between the curriculum developed by the teacher and the curriculum actually experienced by the pupils – **the truth of time vs the truth of screen** (Kalinowska 2022) – is an expression of, on the one hand, a strong need to develop agency and autonomy, and, on the other hand, disagreement with the existing school order and the necessity to adjust. The possibility of managing time and space independently as well as creating a parallel reality was perceived as the biggest advantage of distance education and was recalled by both first and third graders. This practice can be inscribed in the hidden distance education curriculum (Kwieciński 2004). A pupil acts in an informal manner, unplanned by the teacher, as a result of learning conditions at that time.

This alternative world was, however, interrupted, temporary, because the child-creator simultaneously performed the role of a pupil constantly controlling what is happening during classes in order to meet school requirements at least at the level controlled by adults. In a sense, pupils experienced a state of suspension, independently organising the learning environment in order to survive rather than to develop cognitively. They were searching for ways to adapt to new conditions. Perhaps that is why pupils asked by the researcher: "What did you succeed in during distance learning and what did you succeed in at school?" answered: "P: I succeeded in doing nothing during distance education. S: Same!!! (together)" (3rd grade). Adaptive behaviours aimed at coping in the new educational reality constitute the testimony for children's creativity, yet, on the other hand, were unwelcome by the teachers. The subjective **being in the world** is a result of continuous learning and control over development of self in a changing world. Therefore, the question remains, did the distance education conditions actually favour the above?

Summary

Children quickly adjusted to the online learning conditions in the space at home. It required them to activate individual resources and creatively adapt to new conditions. During distance education, they organised their space and managed their time independently, while controlling what was going on during online classes.

Apart from the fascination experienced by the pupils, resulting from staying online, positive aspects mentioned by the pupils predominantly result from releasing the individual from the institutional coercion. Distance education resulted in the extended area of the place where pupils were staying, things they had access to, or activities they could perform. The limited teacher directiveness resulting from mediated learning favoured creating conditions in which a pupil, while moving around the home and online space, had the possibility to decide on performed activities and manage their own time, by creating a parallel and attractive world in which they could meet their most important needs, such as: the need for

rest, contact with peers online, hiding from a controlling teacher, or access to food and drink at any time. On the other hand, however, pupils did not have the opportunity to use these resources in the cognitive or upbringing context. Support in the process of self-creation and extending individual space did not fit into the planned school measures during distance education, but at the informal level, by creating a parallel reality while at the same time "pretending," hiding from the teacher or simulating learning.

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