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Respect for the Right to Education in the COVID-19 Pandemic Time. Towards Reimagining Education and Reimagining Ways of Respecting the Right to Education

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Abstract

The main aim of this paper is to raise reflection on the conditions of respect for the right to education in the unexpected, pandemic time and after. The right to education is presented as the main agent of personal and social well-being, respect for human dignity, and the power of changing the world. The main question that organizes the structure of this paper concerns the conditions of respecting the right to education in Poland during remote education forced by a pandemic. Attention is focused on conditions, such as the place of living, possibilities for parents with different levels of education to support students, and access to broadband Internet. The discussion highlights the role of imagination as a factor of change in education and ways of respect for the right to education.

Key words: *right to education, remote education, pandemic, ICT, reimagination of education*

Introduction

The right to education is the universal right of every person. It can be considered a natural law, because people learn, discover the world, and improve their skills from the beginning of the history of humankind. This right was formalized and enshrined, *inter alia*, in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). Its precursors can already be found in Jan Amos Komensky's work titled "The Great Didactics". More than 1.75 billion children and young people worldwide currently enjoy this right. In this text, I try to analyze the conditions of respecting the right to education in a situation of radical global change caused by a pandemic. I focus on describing the consequences of the collapse of the traditional "educational grammar" and the possibilities of using the educational potential of the devices, which until now were rather gadgets, and using them in educational interactions was considered a whim or even prohibited. The theoretical framework of the text is the critical pedagogy, on the basis of which questions are asked about the conditions of experiencing freedom, equality, and justice, including access to the good that is education.

The main question which organizes the data collection and analysis is as follows: What are the conditions for respecting children's and young people's right to education under lockdown caused by pandemic? The answer to this question may be the starting point for a discussion on the reimagination of conditions and respecting the right to education both at the micro and macro scale. This discussion is already taking place in many circles, professional, and unprofessional, formal and informal. It reveals a rich variety of problems and challenges. It indicates certain typically local phenomena, but also those that are universal. Among these are the opportunities but also the limitations of education with ICT and the potential of the Wikiworld.

First of all, I discuss the right to education as an indicator of behavior in conditions of suspension of teaching and educational activities in schools and educational institutions. Against this background, I present the conditions for respecting this right in a situation of an obligation to stay at home and (some) the consequences of transferring educational interactions and the implementation of the core curriculum from traditional school space-time to the home environment.

Right to Education

As Comenius wrote in the 17th century: “all young people, of both genders, should go to school. We should send to school not only the children of rich or dignified people but of everyone, both nobles, and bourgeois, rich and poor, boys and girls, in big cities and small towns and villages”. (Komensky 1967, p. 63). The right to education is the main agent at the forefront of fulfilling personal and social well-being. “States Parties recognize the right of the child to education” - such an obligation, enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989, was ratified by 196 countries around the world.

Education is not a privilege. As one of the most important human activities should (even must) be guaranteed and enforced by the state. It is the responsibility of the State to ensure that the right to education is respected and to create the conditions for its exercise, including exceptional, unforeseen circumstances.

This right is the agent to fulfil the three big ideas, namely: “socialization, Plato’s academic idea, and Rousseau’s idea of development.” (Egan 2008, p.9). But they are incompatible. Moreover, each of them is in dynamic dialectic relations with phenomena and processes in the world of nature, culture, and technology. This requires a view of education and the right to education that takes into account the pandemic experience.

The great belief in the driving force of education in improving and promoting the well-being of people around the world does not mean that respect for this right is universal. It still faces many permanent, but also unexpected and unpredictable obstacles. There is still a large group of children and adolescents who are unable to exercise this right or make only limited use of it. The most common contemporary obstacles to respecting the right to education include wars and armed conflicts, the economic situation, local traditions and laws, especially in relation to girls and women. Respecting this right still requires effort and sometimes sacrifice, as exemplified by the story of Malala Yousafzai who was awarded a Nobel Peace Prize. But the unexpected obstacle on an unprecedented scale is the pandemic COVID -19 which is now threatening education. This situation, unfortunately, influences the most marginalized and vulnerable students, mainly from the poor areas and low cultural capital.

Research questions and method of collecting data

The presented situation raises many questions about the conditions of respecting the right to education in conditions caused by a pandemic. One of them is: Why and how one should reimagine education and reimagine ways of realization the right to education? Answering this question needs the wide inter and multi-disciplines research. Hence the main question I try to answer in this text is: **what are the conditions for dealing with education during a pandemic?** Of the many variables, I focus only on two, namely the material and cultural capital conditions at the site of learning, enforced by pandemic, means in the home environment. Hypothetically, I assume that in remote teaching and learning forced by pandemic, these two conditions play a key role. By the material condition, I mean access to broadband and to digital equipment. By the cultural capital, I mean family from different socio-economic backgrounds that may have the different abilities (in terms of both cognitive and non-cognitive skills) and availability to support their children in their learning process at home during the lockdown. (Di Pietro et al. 2020, p. 12).

I am looking for the answer to this question and for verification of the hypothesis in data published in generally available sources. In my analysis, I use the existing data (Reardon, Stuart 2019, p. 568) which means information previously collected by local, state, or national agencies. Existing sources of education data (statistics, records) I use are available on the World Wide Web or through government agencies such as the statistical resources of The Central Statistical Office, UNESCO, Eurostat. The use of the existing data is an example of a non-reactive study. I use these existing data to address my question.

Why one should reimagine the formal education? Because the „traditional” paradigm (Robinson 2010), “grammar of schooling” (Tyack, Tobin 1994, p. 454) and “banking education” (Freire 2005, p. 72) do not work in the open real and virtual world, especially now, when rules everyday life. One has to imagine new content and forms of educational interactions, especially with children and young people. They are familiar with and accustomed to new tools and new sources of information. Most of them are natives in the virtual space. In the world of Google, Facebook, and other „common places” they feel like a fish in the water, and scrolling is a natural activity, like a tooth brushing right after waking up. Tools like smartphones keep people connected with the world all the time. One looks for information on the Internet and makes various choices. Meantime the classroom equipped with black/green/whiteboard and with the teacher in the center is the place of boring, tiring, and wasting time. That is just

one of the reasons one needs the reimagination of educational interactions from the ground up. It requires imagination, fantasy, courage, but also responsibility. Now that challenge, caused by a horrible disease, is inevitable. Digital gadgets, so criticized by parents and teachers (“prohibited fruits”) have become a “staple food” in compulsory learning and teaching on all levels of formal education.

Education is not only the agent of changing the world, it also changes itself. It was knocked out of traditional roots. Its participants were knocked out of their daily routines, from everyday school’s rituals. Students and teachers found themselves in unusual situations requiring new skills and special emotional and moral condition. They were transferred from the traditional space-time - classroom system - in a very short time (literally within a few days in March 2020) to another environment for the realization of their tasks and programs. This made it necessary to update education as a process in synergy with the world in order to improve it. Hopefully, the “frostbite” of school’s work after the pandemic will result or may result, in new patterns of educational interaction.

Respecting children’s right to education out of school – chosen data

In an unexpected, violent descolarization forced by the pandemic, schools became the first closed institutions. According to UNESCO data, school closures as a government response to pandemic threats have affected almost the whole world. This is illustrated by the following data taken from the UNESCO (UNESCO-UIS. Stat 2020)

- **16.02.2020**–1 country (Mongolia) closed all its schools and since then other countries have decided to close their schools;
- **04.04.2020** – In 195 countries, all schools were closed, resulting in 1,598,099,008 pupils affected by the isolation (91. 3% of the total number of pupils);
- **01.05.2020** – The number of countries with all closed schools falls to 182, resulting in 1,287,401,633 pupils affected by the isolation (73. 5% of the total number of pupils);
- **11.06.2020** – all schools still closed in 129 countries, which means that 1 109 020 109 pupils are still not attending school (63. 3% of total pupils);
- **02.09.2020**–826,802,660 affected learners (47,2% of total enrolled learners), 46 country-wide closures;

- **10.09.2020** – 868,011,845 affected learners (49,6% of total enrolled learners), 50 country-wide closures
- **07.10.2020** – 579,936.463 affected learners (33,1% of total enrolled learners), still 35 country-wide closures

In Poland in the middle of March 2020, almost 6.5 million children and young people from 26 000 institutions (including preschoolers) and 1.2 million students (over 21% of citizens) were left in homes. The lockdown has not only affected pupils and teachers but also their parents and guardians. “School life” has moved from the school classroom to the living room, kitchen, or other rooms. It is no longer shared with peers and teachers in the classroom but with the family members, home pets, plants, accompanied by pieces of home equipment, as well as with sounds and smells. Functioning in the daily school culture, sometimes learned with difficulty, subordination to discipline, compliance with norms, and adaptation to patterns of behavior have been suspended. This, in turn, triggered the temptation to ease body and mind discipline.

The material and cultural status of the family is a key source of its educational potential. Let us, therefore, look at this potential of Polish families according to three criteria, namely: a place of residence, level of education, and equipping households with digital equipment and devices, including the ability to adapt to the obligation to provide their children with Internet access.

Out of more than 3 millions of all Polish primary school students, 1,321,200 live in the countryside. One draws attention to this group of students because of the cultural capital of their family environment expressed by the level of education. This is illustrated by the Fig. 1.

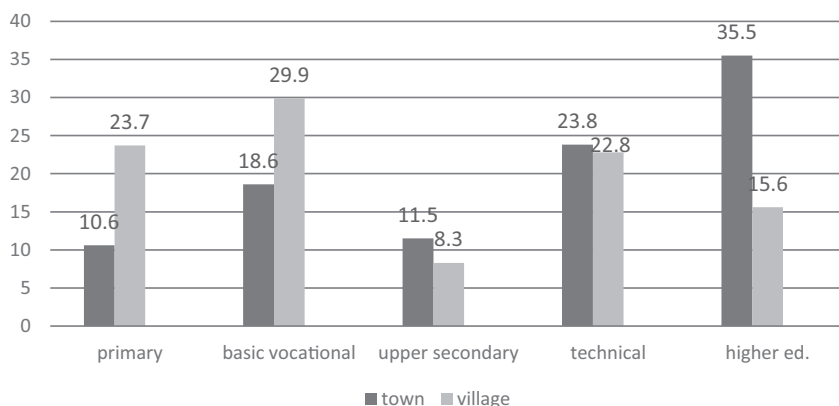


Figure 1. Polish population by place of residence and education (2019, in %). Source: own elaboration on the base of data from The Central Statistical Office

Paying attention to this context of respect for the child's right to education stems from the family's role in participation in children's education. It is changed with the caesura of the pandemic. While "before the pandemic" the learning conditions were (almost) the same regardless of the material condition and cultural potential of the family, the learning at home reveals the diversity of educational opportunities for pupils from different backgrounds. Crucial for the success of the online education environment is parental involvement. Parents should ensure that learners are focused on the assigned tasks. But it is not easy. In the rural environment, it is noteworthy that more than half (53.6%) of adult inhabitants have primary and basic vocational education. Many learners cannot count on the help of adult household members or even older siblings. It is not only experienced in families with low education. Parents with higher education also find it difficult to help their children with "school" tasks.

The fulfillment of school tasks at home is often accompanied by comments-questions from the members of family: "what is this for?", "do you need these skills in your life?" Such questions indicate the separateness of two worlds: the world of school and the world of everyday life. This cannot be overcome by parents' involvement in the realization of the school's functions – educational, caring, advisory, therapeutic, and compensatory.

Another criterion for describing the educational potential of Polish families, or rather Polish homes, and respect for the right to education is the access to the digital equipment and devices used in everyday life. There are considerable socio-economic inequalities in students' access to digital technologies at home. Students from higher socioeconomic status are significantly more likely to have a laptop or a computer at home than those from lower socioeconomic status. Thus students from less advantaged backgrounds are less likely to have access to digital resources at home, hence less likely to have a suitable home learning environment. According to data published in the report of the Central Statistical Office (GUS) in 2019, 86.7% of households had access to the Internet and 83.1% of households with at least one person aged 16–74 had at least one computer at home. However, in addition to a computer, laptop, and smartphone, school tasks involve the use of copying devices and printers. And these no longer belong to the permanent home furnishings.

Access to broadband Internet is an easy way to learn at home, to remote education. According to GUS data, in 2019, 83.3% of households had such access. This access was differentiated, among other things, according to the place of residence (as can be seen in Fig. 2) and the fact of having children. Almost all homes with children (99.3% compared to 80.4% without children) had access to the Internet,

which undoubtedly facilitated the decision to use this measure in forced remote education. However, this does not mean that it really opens the way for the use of the educational potential of this medium.

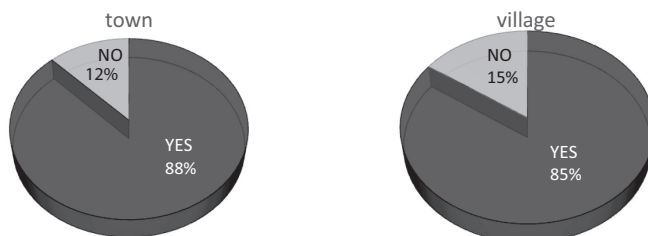


Figure 2. Access to the Internet

Source: own elaboration on the base of data from The Central Statistical Office

This means that as never before, both adults, children, and young people have many opportunities to use digital media, but the thing is, by whom, how, and what for that boom is used. Especially in the context of education. As Jean-Hervé Lorenzi and Mickaël Berrebi state: “Reality, far from the dream of easily accessible, extensive and useful knowledge, sometimes turns out to be quite bleak. It should be stressed that we still lack the tools to make the utopia of universal access to knowledge a reality. We have, above all, new knowledge carriers at our disposal, which offer us new ICT solutions.” (Lorenzi, Berrebi 2019, p. 153).

Nevertheless, many students still have difficulties because of the limited access to the Internet and the lack of adequate IT equipment at home. In order to adapt to the requirements of fulfilling the duty to study in many homes, space was rearranged, new equipment appeared, time management was reorganized. I dare to risk paraphrasing an African proverb - the whole village is involved in bringing up a child - and to say that all the family members (including domestic flora and fauna) are involved in the realization of the school’s core curriculum. Their skills and behavior not only influence the fulfillment of immediate school tasks but also the life careers of learners.

The information presented on the educational potential of the family and home environment, although it does not cover the whole spectrum of its elements, indicates the scale of limitations in access to quality education as well as points out the impact of the Gini coefficient (opening scissors) in relation to school achievements and, as a result, reducing the chances of emancipation through education.

Other problems are caused by the digital competences of teachers, or rather their methodological skills in using the potential of new technologies. These

factors not only threaten respect for the right to high-quality education but the implementation of this right in general.

Conclusions

While this opens up opportunities for universal, democratic access to knowledge, commitment to knowledge multiplication and, as a result, increasing the chances of respecting the right to lifelong learning in every corner of the world, it also requires a change in the approach to education, to educational interactions as circumstances for mutual learning, and to the dissemination of horizontal relationships that foster the sharing of knowledge and skills. It also requires trust in people and things (including devices) and the development and updating of the “four C’s”, pointed out by Yuval Harari, it means “Critical thinking, Communication, Cooperation, and Creativity” (Harari 2018, p. 335). These “four C’s” are the basis for the engagement of persons and groups in the collective creation of a vision of the future. This applies also to the future of education as well as imagery of ways the real implementation of the right to education.

The enforced remote education helps to trigger imagination about the content and forms of learning and teaching as well as grading. These Harari’s four C’s help us to imagine the most fantastic (in sense of fantasy) conditions of fully implementing the right to education in the most unexpected situations.

The link between imagination and social life is increasingly a global and de-territorialized one. The imagination expressed in dreams, songs, fantasies, myths, and stories has always been in every society. But there is a peculiar new force to the imagination in social life today. People in different parts of the world have an opportunity to consider a wider set of possible ways of life than ever before.

Implementation of the right to education as an agent of the change of the world faces many barriers and challenges. Some of them have accompanied the upbringing, education, and learning processes for a long time, others have emerged with the pandemic. More of them will appear after the limitations caused by it have ceased to exist and one must be faced with the new, often unknown situations that will arise. It’s hard to call it coming back to what is well known. Rather, it will be a migration to “new worlds”, where digital devices may be the “guide”. This opens up new fields of pedagogical reflection. In my opinion, it is impossible to return to education functioning according to the principles of the previous “grammar”. It is also impossible to erase the emotions and skills that accompany home learning.

Emotions and skills not only of students and teachers but also of all the household members.

One ought to stress that the right to education is not only for opening ways to a decent life and social well-being but also the key agent of understanding the wonder of the world, feeling the passion, and for the richness of the entire human experience. Thus, as Juha Suoranta wrote, “the following words must be taken to the heart: »Engaged in a collective re-imagining of the present and future, creative collaboration is our best chance to leave a positive legacy. We cannot allow our children to live in the heavy detritus of outdated practices and platforms«” (Suoranta 2011, p. 500).

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