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Children's experience of distance learning – the everyday life of first graders

**Dziecięce doświadczanie edukacji zdalnej
- codzienność pierwszoklasistów**

Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to present the everyday school life of younger pupils in pandemic times. The rationale behind the study (conducted from the child's perspective) lies in the conviction that minors are active actors who understand and interpret the social reality around them and, therefore, are the most reliable source of information (for adults) on the meaning of everyday situations for them. It is validated by a new sociology of childhood that treats children as active agents who play a major part in creating their own childhood (Corsaro, 2015). The research material was collected through a focus group interview with first grade pupils from selected primary schools in Poland. This helped the authors understand children's experience of distance learning. Analysis of the collected material reveals the many and diverse experiences children have regarding e-learning. The study makes it possible to identify the main categories impacting their daily school-related activities, the tangible environment that constitutes the physical space behind these activities, and the accompanying emotions. It shows that the peculiar nature of distance learning (resulting from changes in social relationships, level of competences – especially digital – and the different degree of support from family and teachers) meant that pupils' education in the pandemic provoked very strong, diverse emotions. Negative

feelings predominated, including the fear and sadness typical for dangerous situations.

Keywords: early education, everyday school, pandemic.

Introduction

The pandemic of the SARS-CoV-2 virus imposed a new model of education upon society. Where it was previously a little used option, distance learning became a necessity, posing new challenges for teachers, educational institutions, and above all, for pupils and their families. Even though it may often be perceived as a threat, evoking a number of negative emotions, it can also be seen as an opportunity for new educational solutions which may become a source of positive and valuable changes.

The initial experiences we had have already revealed an ambiguous picture of the effects of the actions taken. We have encountered difficulties, experienced failures, and made mistakes, but at the same time there has been a sense of impact, pedagogical successes and positive feedback from pupils and their families (Pyżalski, 2020, p. 3).

The COVID-19 epidemic marked a period of unique experiences, not only for adults, but also (or perhaps primarily) for children. Analysis of their daily school life is validated by a new sociology of childhood that treats minors as active players, whose perception of the world is relevant not because they are future adults, but because of their current position. It considers them as acting purposefully and being actors who collect knowledge that may result from their own reflection on their educational experiences (Corsaro, 2015).

The concept of everyday life as a research subject in the social sciences

Everyday life is a realm of natural, spontaneous, and genuine experiences. Being an intuitive concept, its meaning appears to be self-explanatory. However, it needs clarification, especially when it is the subject of research. Therefore, one should dismiss „everyday” life as a concept detached from the subject and considered only in the context of specific personal experiences. When understood in this manner, everyday life is always somebody’s, and it always has a temporal parameter" (Sulima, 2019, p. 102).

Although everyday life is considered synonymous with ordinary life – undisturbed, going on unnoticed and thus leaving few traces in the memory – it may sometimes take place in an exceptional period.

But then again, war has its everyday life, plague has its everyday life, flood has its everyday life (...). Even if it is then violently transformed. But let us imagine – if a flood lasts many days, a certain rhythm of activities is established, a rhythm of provisioning, waiting for help. And this also becomes an everyday life (Brzostek, 2019, p. 113).

An interesting field of research regarding the concept of everyday life are the educational practices of young pupils during the coronavirus pandemic. To help understand how children process their everyday life, what meanings they give to reality, and how they construct a mental map of the world in which they live, it is vital for researchers to understand children as actors of social life, active members of the community, imaginative creators of reality and cultural meanings (Zwiernik, 2009).

Research methodology

The conducted research¹ was an empirical qualitative study, focusing on children's experiences during the coronavirus pandemic, and located in the constructivist paradigm which assumes that the world is as people represent it. Social realities are constantly being constructed and reconstructed, and the only way to identify them is to understand people's opinions, experiences and beliefs.

The aim of the study was to describe children's school-related experiences during the pandemic. By employing concepts that describe the analysed state of affairs and have specific meanings, one can reach an understanding that is recognised by social sciences also as interpretation (Urbaniak-Zajac, 2009). In this study, this interpretation concerned individuals and their opinions, including those attributed to distance learning. The research involved first graders (6-person cohorts from selected primary schools in Bialystok, Kielce, Lodz, Torun and Warsaw) and was conducted on the assumption that children, being active subjects who understand, interpret and process the social reality around them, are the most reliable source of information (for adults) on the meaning that everyday situations have for them (Corsaro, 2005).

When one adopts the approach applied by Wilhelm von Humboldt and Leo Weisgerber (who argue that cognitive content, knowledge, experience

¹ The study was conducted by the research group as part of the Elementary Education Team operating at the Elementary Education Section within the Committee of Pedagogical Sciences (Polish Academy of Sciences).

and valuation of the perceived reality are revealed in the linguistic image of the world)

(...) through the mutual correlation of thought and word, it becomes clear that languages are not actually means of depicting already known truths, but something significantly broader, namely – means of discovering previously unrecognised truths. Their diversity is not only the diversity of sounds and signs, but actually the diversity of the very ways of perceiving the world (Wasilewska, 2009, p. 97).

On this basis, the following research question was formulated: What picture of distance learning emerges from the children's statements?

The research material was collected during focus group interviews, which helped determine how children experience e-learning. This method does not only allow the respondents to articulate opinions and assessments, but also to hear what others have to say. Moreover, it provides conditions for a mutual exchange of ideas, comparing one's own views with the opinions of others (Kubiak, 2007), and creating an opportunity to delve into the emotional states that lie behind verbalised beliefs (Dukaczewska-Nałęcz, 1999).

Analysis of collected material

The analysis of the data from open-ended questions was grounded on the theory by Glaser and Strauss, taking into account the concept of theoretical sensitivity (Strauss, Corbin), which resulted from the recognition of various theoretical approaches, and from a consistent implementation of the principle of openness (Urbaniak-Zajac, 2009). The children's responses allowed the authors to distinguish three categories by which they structured their experience of distance learning. These are the respondents' everyday activities, the tangible environment that constituted the physical space where these activities are performed, and the accompanying emotions that remain inextricably linked to the realm of daily life.

Pupils' activities

The process of education is a set of interdependent activities performed by the teacher and pupils, designed to achieve a specific goal and performed under purposefully construed conditions. The study reveals many of the children's small, routine school-related activities, undertaken individually or jointly.

Learning would begin with preparatory activities that involved turning on the electronic equipment:

We tried to connect and it didn't work. Eventually, we stopped trying and I just missed that lesson.

The connection was poor and we weren't always able to join the class. Sometimes you couldn't hear everything and you couldn't see everything.

While in-person learning mainly relies on teachers (whose knowledge, skills and attitudes are the driving force behind education), during distance learning, the involvement of parents increased considerably:

I didn't know how to log on to Teams, so I asked dad for help.

I didn't know what some of the buttons did. My dad would press something and it would unlock or turn on something, and it would install something for me, and when it froze, dad would do all sorts of things that I couldn't do.

I would ask mum because dad was busy working, but he knows more about computers than mum.

These statements indicate that pupils often lacked the digital competences which are necessary to participate in online lessons. Some students were able to operate the equipment and overcome technical difficulties on their own, while others relied on the support of adults, or were even unable to participate when challenged by issues beyond their digital competence.

Activities during lessons

Integrated education involves many spheres and requires diverse and varied activities for children (tailored to individual needs and abilities):

We listened to the teacher, we sat in front of the computer, we did tasks that she had prepared for us, we solved puzzles, we wrote in line and grid notebooks, we did math exercises, we read instructions from the textbook, we practiced, but I guess what we did the most was sit on our chairs.

In their statements, pupils recall activities from the majority of educational subjects in the curriculum, predominantly languages (Polish and foreign), mathematics, visual arts and physical education:

We had maths. If we had to put it in our notebook, the teacher would turn on the whiteboard, and show us what to write. And if it was in textbooks, the teacher would go into some books, apps, something like that, and she would choose and tell us what to do, and we'd do it.

We also did a lot of Polish. We wrote in notebooks and read.

We had art and we did some artwork, we made different paper mosaics.

It is not fun during languages, because the teacher would play some weird videos all the time, from which we don't remember anything, and then she says: 'Ok, darlings, now repeat everything'. Every single word.

The individualisation is virtually non-existent. On only one occasion did pupils recall activities in different rooms that encouraged individualised work, even if they only served the purpose of doing the same activities in smaller groups:

Only in drama classes were we in 4 different rooms. We performed some scenes or told some stories. Very cool stuff.

There were also numerous difficulties related to learning and the implementation of teaching activities. These were, for instance, due to the unique nature of a given area of knowledge. The children either appreciated the reason behind these difficulties (as was the case with music lessons), or they only acknowledged the fact, which can be illustrated with the example of physical education classes which require space and safety measures, or natural science lessons which are based on observation and experience:

We didn't have real PE. The lessons were lame because the teacher records videos of exercises that we then have to do on our own at home.

We didn't sing because there's too much noise online.

If everyone sang at the same time, it would never work, it's just impossible.

When online, I don't remember learning anything about nature. Nothing at all.

Difficulties were also due to the presence of other people (family members, neighbours, etc.):

I live in a block of flats and I couldn't jump because this lady came to complain.

My lessons looked like this: first I'd log on, then I'd read a text in the textbook, then my brother would come and bang on my door, then I'd have to mute myself and yell to my parents to take him away, but he'd soon come back, and so on for, like, 57 times.

Sometimes my sister would say: turn off Teams because I am losing my signal, and she wanted me to turn off the computer, but I also had lessons at that time, so what was I supposed to do? Leave class and get a bad mark?

Problems not only stemmed from unreliable electronic equipment, but also from the inability of both pupils and teachers to use it effectively. The children's statements corroborate the results of studies into the computer literacy of early school education teachers, and indicate the problems they experience with regard to natural sciences, technology and computers (Czaja-Chudyba and Muchacka, 2016):

During maths, it sometimes freezes and we don't know how to do the task, and then we have to ask our classmates, but they don't always know either.

There were also times when the priest said that he had sent us various things, but these things were not there at all.

There were also surprising difficulties caused by pets, an additional distraction during distance learning:

I associate online learning with my cat's constant scratching when I had her in my arms during lessons. Or with her climbing onto the keyboard. I had to chase her away and she wouldn't go and eventually I had to log out and I lost almost the whole lesson because of that.

Once I had this situation with my dog. When I took him on my lap, he climbed onto the desk and walked around the keyboard, and everything switched off.

The difficulties reported by pupils also included having a different relationship with classmates and the teacher due to a lack of direct contact. After all, not feeling alone can help people to cope with problems. This impaired communication between the participants of the teaching process was compounded by limited non-verbal communication: no eye contact, no facial expressions, no gestures, no touch:

You can't see the teacher, your friends. You would like to play, do something, but you can't.

*You can't tell a secret because everyone would hear it right away.
You can finally hug the teacher, she is finally real now.*

During lessons, the children also had parental support (more often mum's). This included help with learning, proper nutrition and the equally important hydration of the children:

I would ask Mum to help me, she would enlarge the picture for me so that I could see better.

Sometimes mum would come and give me a drink or something to eat.

Pupils developed different ideas to facilitate e-learning, various strategies to cope, more or less successfully, with the issues encountered. They would often use a sense of humour, which can be particularly vital at times of stress. All these reactions can be seen as a defensive posture induced by unusual circumstances:

*During online lessons you could sit in your pyjamas.
I usually ate sandwiches, or snacked secretly during the lesson.*

And you could also turn off the webcam and read cheat sheets.

Sometimes pupils just keep staring at one spot, holding their hand still and not moving, so it looks like everything has frozen and the teacher thinks your net is laggy.

During recess time, children would also do various activities initiated by themselves or the teacher:

*I could play with my younger sister during the breaks.
I could then talk to my girlfriends and we could play games together.
During the breaks, the teacher would put on some music or we would do jumping jacks.*

After lessons, the pupils would still have to do their homework:

After school, the first thing I did was my homework.

We had to send homework to the teacher, different artwork, photos, but during lessons we wouldn't show our work, which was a bit strange...

Tangible environment – space and objects

The educational environment, including the physical, tangible space, has the potential to foster activity where the child can acquire experience in different fields and broaden their knowledge (Bałachowicz, 2018/2019). Everyday activities are possible because objects serve people as tools to perform ordinary tasks, and also because every tool serves a specific purpose, which, through its presence, enables us to perform and repeat the said activity. Objects make everyday life safe and known; we know exactly what we should do and how we should do it (Gołębiowski, 2019).

When learning online, the respondents used different areas of the home/apartment, with it only sometimes being a private space especially for the child:

I would go to my room. My dad had installed the net in my room and I had Teams on my tablet.

I study in my room. I have books on my desk and there is a lamp.

More often it was a shared space, accessible to all household members, which required adaptation to their different needs:

I worked on the sofa in the living room.

I had this place at home, a kind of study, it had lots of books on the shelf. And sometimes I was in the green room, because that's our computer room.

I studied in the kitchen because I didn't have my own room.

At times, children also joined e-lessons from outside the home. They would join classes while at their parents' workplace, in the car, or even at the doctor's:

Sometimes I also joined classes from my dad's work. I would log in and have a desk there.

Sometimes you were in the car too!!! (laughs) I had my computer with me and then there was a religion class.

I also happened to be at the doctor's when I got connected.

The objects that children associate with e-learning are mainly the electronic equipment: computers, laptops, tablets, phones, printers. In addition to the items typical for online learning, children also mentioned books, pencil cases, and chairs, which, apparently, they find crucial. This may be so because an ergonomic chair is the most important element of a well-equipped work/learning station:

I had a chair when I was studying, obviously! (laughs) A desk, lots of books I had to have, and of course the computer which was at an angle so I couldn't see everything clearly on the screen. And I had something to drink in my favourite cup with a unicorn.

I had my printer, books, notebooks. And of course a chair. I kept my books on the bed. I used my dad's old computer from work.

A comfortable armchair/chair was a great asset, facilitating studying, while its absence caused discomfort, impeding the learning process:

I had this awesome gaming chair, it's super modern, cool and you can spin on it. You can press the button and just lay back there.

I would lie on the chair. Sometimes I would bring another one to make myself more comfortable.

Well ... when my back hurt from sitting, I would lie down.

I kept leaning back in my chair and swaying until once I even fell.

Emotions accompanying learning

When looking at everyday practices, the emotional component cannot be overlooked. Emotions accompany our thinking processes and actions, they are an element of narration, introspection, retrospection, self-analysis, self-definition, and creation (Konecki, 2014).

The young respondents reported mainly negative emotions accompanying e-learning. These emotions are associated with constant stress, and inhibit the brain receptors responsible for learning. Pupils highlighted their

unease related to the coronavirus pandemic (an obvious reaction to the reality, of a specific threat):

I was afraid that my whole family would get infected and I would have to go to an orphanage instead of being with my parents.

I was also scared when I found out what the disease was... I even cried.

Children also talked about sadness resulting from isolation, loneliness, lack of peer-to-peer contact (a common consequence of extreme experiences, unfortunate events, fear):

I felt bad, we couldn't meet anyone. It was sad, we couldn't play with friends, there was no one at home. We were separated from each other and lessons were different to those at school. We couldn't meet anyone. Sadness, crying and all that's worst in the world.

I felt isolated, disconnected from the whole world. Locked in a cage.

Oh! Nicely said. I feel locked in a cage.

They also mentioned sadness at the loss of loved ones:

And I am still sad because my grandfather died of coronavirus.

They reported feeling concerned about the difficulties (mostly technical) associated with online learning:

I also got upset when I couldn't connect and attend a lesson, even when it was for a few minutes.

I was annoyed because the connection was hopeless and I couldn't hear the teacher.

I was annoyed because the computer was malfunctioning... It kept kicking me out... Like it was possessed.

This annoyance was sometimes quite intense, transforming into anger, which was expressed in various ways:

I would get frustrated and bang on the keyboard.

I shouted at my dad, banged on the computer and kept moving the mouse and trying to log on all the time. I tried so, so hard to log on, and when it took forever, I got so angry that I almost broke the window.

To manage their anger, the children applied different solutions, sometimes suggested by their teachers:

The teacher says that instead of hitting something, it is better to kick it, but not too hard so as not to break your leg, or kick a wall, or to make a paper ball.

*For example, I would scream into a pillow.
I prefer to shout it out at the wall.*

Some were able to look at the difficulties with humour, displaying a non-schematic interpretation of reality. Importantly, this attitude facilitates cognitive development and promotes learning:

If I couldn't log on, I'd call in mum, but most often my dad would then come, and anyway I felt like throwing this computer through the balcony door.

Children emphasised boredom, a feeling of inner emptiness, a state of discomfort related to inactivity accompanying distance learning. After all, it is cognitive curiosity that best stimulates the learning process:

*It was so boring that it was impossible to sit still for three hours.
If I got lost in thought, the teacher wouldn't ask me, because I didn't volunteer to answer.*

The young respondents also pointed to constant fatigue:

You're tired of staring at the screen all the time, and you're in tears because you can't switch off at all because you've got to see everything, and your ears can't rest because you've got to listen, and your hands can't relax either because they've got to write, and that's why you're tired all the time, and during the breaks you'd just feel like going back to bed.

Whenever we finished lessons, my eyes would close I was so sleepy and drowsy after class.

Children did recall positive emotions, although considerably less frequently:

I felt good because we didn't have too many lessons and because there was a break that lasted an hour.

It was nice when there was a break sometimes, because we could text each other on the chat.

Studying at home is nice because you can go downstairs, eat something and you can also talk to your parents.

Summary

Analysis of the collected material reveal children's diverse experiences regarding e-learning. The study enabled the identification of the issues that dominated the children's daily school activities, their tangible environment, and the accompanying emotions for online lessons.

The survey of first graders indicates that specific preparation for such lessons is required. Although children at this age have a great deal of experience with electronic equipment, the need to use a specified learning platform was a challenge for them, often requiring adult support. The statements about the actual lessons are also dominated by stories on the technical aspect of the classes, including limitations of the family's electronic devices and their unreliability. The young respondents also experienced the disruptive presence of others – siblings, neighbours, or even pets. They reported a noticeable change in relationships, a lack of direct contact with classmates and teachers, which they found difficult to accept. At the same time, they seem significantly less concerned about the educational content, although they realise that such subjects as music lessons, natural sciences or physical education were considerably impaired and difficult for the teacher to conduct.

The way E-learning at home was experienced was a result of many, mostly tangible, conditions. Some pupils had both separate space and equipment at their disposal, while others were forced to share with other family members. The peculiar nature of distance learning (resulting from changes in social relationships, level of competences – especially digital – and the different degree of support from family and teachers) meant that pupils' education in the pandemic provoked very strong, diverse emotions. Negative feelings predominated, including the fear and sadness typical for dangerous situations. These were coupled with specific reactions (of the body, behaviour

and thoughts), including despondency, inertia, but also with anger, which actually spurred pupils into action. This ire urged the respondents to 'fight, shout, and say what you do not like' and also motivated them to search for new ways of coping with the adverse circumstances. It induced children's creativity, allowing them to devise original solutions to 'survive'.

After normal school I'm sometimes sad and sometimes happy, but after e-learning I'm always glad it's over.

The results of the study call for an in-depth pedagogical reflection on not only the actions taken by the pupils and the teacher, but also on the emotional and social development of younger pupils – learning ourselves in complex relationships with others and the world within which we operate (Klus-Stańska, 2018, p. 22-23). It is difficult to relate them to the children's experience of everyday education in other countries affected by the pandemic due to the lack of such publications. However, they are in line with the reflections of Davide Parmigiani – President of the Association for Teacher Education in Europe (ATEE) expressed during the international scientific conference held in Kielce² concerning the emotional costs of the remote learning process. They also confirm the validity of the guidelines included in the UNESCO report entitled *Thinking about Pedagogy in an Unfolding Pandemic* (2020), which emphasise the importance of flexibility in planning the educational process. This flexibility is necessary given the diverse resources both in terms of pupils' skills and physical environment, showing this is not a time for a unilateral, top-down approach to education.

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