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ORIGINAL RESEARCH ARTICLE

Learning patterns and risks in distance learning during the COVID-19 lockdown – the pupils' perspective in drama pedagogy-based focus groups

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In this study, primary school pupils have been surveyed using the methodology of drama pedagogy, focusing on two research questions: what the risks of online activities are and how children cope with these, and what the experiences of children with distance learning were. This study investigated both areas jointly from the pupils' perspective. Three anonymous online focus groups were conducted with 16 Hungarian pupils (4 boys and 12 girls; age range: 11–15 years) in July 2020, who joined to the research on a voluntary basis and have been recruited from three rural counties with different socioeconomic backgrounds. Respondents unequivocally recounted that during the lockdown, they had spent a significant part of their time in front of a screen, mostly without adult supervision. Whilst most only experienced different forms of teasing, some cyberbullying instances bordered on criminal cases and required the involvement of parents. High exposure to such risks was experienced during the months when online learning mainly consisted of receiving assignments to work on, and most teachers were almost unavailable. Future research could compare the experiences of pupils and teachers, creating an online safe space for them where they could respond to each other's perceptions, interpretations and opinions anonymously.

To access the supplementary material, please visit the article landing page

Introduction: the effect of COVID-19 on digital transformation in education

Already before the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, several studies (e.g. Livingstone and Helsper 2008; Livingstone, Mascheroni, and Staksrud 2018; Ito et al., 2008) focused on uncovering to what extent the toolkit of the online world was capable of influencing and rearranging the usual routines of our everyday lives. In the first two decades of the millennium, time spent in the digital space increased amongst almost every social group (Buckingham 2020). During the pandemic, the balance of time

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spent offline versus online underwent a dramatic shift towards the latter, not only in public education (e.g. Daniel 2020) but in higher education as well (e.g. Crawford et al. 2020). Research into digital education during the pandemic has exponentially grown during the past 2 years (Mustapha et al. 2021), even questioning whether the unforeseen prevalence of digital education will lead to 'new normality' (Grek and Landri 2021).

At such a unique social- and media historical moment, a Budapest-based research group headlined a project (Németh et al. 2021; Németh & Rajnai, 2021) based on the freely accessible research methodology of the international organization Global Kids Online (Livingstone 2014; EU Kids Online 2014). Originally, this study had been tailored to explore *what the risks are of online activities and how children cope with these*. However, in a world where almost all aspects of everyday life had to be reorganized to fit into the online space, it was obvious that we add another research question: *what the experiences of children with distance learning were*.

Although the reception of digital education has been excessively studied amongst higher education students both in Hungary (e.g. Bogdandy, Tamas, and Toth 2020) and internationally (e.g. Händel et al. 2020), there are less studies about the experiences and attitudes of primary school pupils. As research on the functioning of schools and the behaviour of teachers during the first wave in 2020 has already pointed out, digital distance learning introduced during the lockdowns had a negative effect on children's emotional development due to the limited number of online classes, the lack of interactions and the frequent absence of pupils (e.g. UNICEF 2020). Digital education was especially challenging for children with special needs since related service hours decreased, and many of them could not attend the online courses without continuous support from parents (Sonnenschein et al. 2022).

As to whether schools managed to fulfil their *academic* function, contradicting results have been published. Whereas a recent study in Sweden has shown that there was no COVID-19-related learning loss in reading in primary schools (Hallin et al. 2022), Williamson, Macgilchrist, and Potter (2021) would argue for an economically measurable learning loss.

Scholars, however, agree that the crucial function of schools as socializing environments could not have been fulfilled; to put bluntly, quarantine education did not contribute to emotional development (Osváth & Papp 2020). Besides the state of their mental health, the quality and effectiveness of teachers' work were also affected by two key factors: first, the level of their digital competence, and second, their level of methodological prowess, which, if higher, could have contributed to a more flexible adaptation to these new circumstances as well as to the individual treatment of pupils (N. Kollár 2021). Kang (2021) identified poor motivation, negative effects of device usage and the unequal division of resources as the key obstacles to digital transformation in education.

Research has shown that during the COVID-19 pandemic, the prevalence of cyberbullying has significantly increased amongst US adults (Barlett et al. 2021), Korean adolescents (Shin & Choi 2021), Chinese 'netizens' (Yang 2021) or Kazakh adolescents (Utemissova, Danna, and Nikolaevna 2021), just to name a few. Researching cyberbullying has received increasing attention in the 21st century (e.g. Aboujaoude et al. 2015; Notar, Padgett, and Roden 2013). According to Campbell and Bauman (2018), 'Cyberbullying has been defined as intentional harmful behaviour carried out by a group or individuals, repeated over time, using modern digital technology to aggress against a victim who is unable to defend him/herself' (p. 3).

The above-mentioned two phenomena (increased digital education and the increased prevalence of cyberbullying during the COVID-19 pandemic) have been assessed parallelly. This study intends to investigate both phenomena and the connection between them, since pupils faced both at the same time. Furthermore, this study focuses primarily on the pupils' perspective, as the informants of most of the above quoted school-related research were either teachers or caretakers.

Methodology: drama pedagogy as research in the online space

Drama is an educational method which was created in the middle of the twentieth century in England and combines education with theatre. Drama is an 'as if'-type of activity originating from children's games (e.g. Neelands 1984), during which the role and the situation offered retain their imaginative nature. The facilitator usually controls the game from the inside, often whilst in role. The participants can also reflect on the game in light of their real-life experiences (Davis 2014).

The educational goal of drama is to gain new experiences, examine multiple points of view regarding a central question or theme and deepen understanding. In some cases, it can also be aimed at bringing about change, for example, in attitudes, expectations, social behaviours and developing relationships (e.g. Cziboly & Bethlenfalvy 2013). Its effectiveness in this regard has been confirmed by international large-scale assessment (ILSA) as well (Cziboly & DICE Consortium 2010; Eriksson et al., 2014; Gjærum, Cziboly, and Eriksson 2022). When using drama for focus group research, the latter aim is abandoned; consequently, a research-oriented drama lesson differs greatly from a drama lesson held for explicitly educational (e.g. preventative) purposes.

Dramatic methods such as role-play are used more and more frequently in research (e.g. Bethlenfalvy 2020). This is also apparent role-play research appearing as an independent chapter in the eight edition of the Research Methods in Education (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2018). O'Sullivan explains role-play as a research technique 'useful in studying complex situations, interactions and evolving decisions, and in which issues capable of different interpretations, negotiations or potential conflicts are included' (2018, p. 606). O'Sullivan emphasizes the importance of the 'no-penalty zone' (p. 611) that this type of research technique creates for participants. She also lists a variety of ways in which role-play can become parts of various research frameworks; these span from the researcher observing the role-playing to active participation in the fictional situation. The role-play-based drama focus groups conducted within our research relied on the researcher taking on a role and becoming an active participant and facilitator of the fiction. Besides engaging in role-play, participants were also given a so-called 'commission' (Heathcote and Bolton 1995; Kipling and Hickley-Moody 2015) as experts on their own life experiences: no one has more knowledge and information than they do, and we rely on them. The game's facilitator plays the role of 'being in need of help'.

Thus, applying drama methodology for research purposes provides a narrative framework that makes the conversation interesting for participants and involves them in collective thinking. If facilitators play their roles well, participants will have a stake in the game: to present their lives as authentically as possible whilst solving the fictional problems of fictional characters, with fiction offering them protection (O'Neill 1995). A similar methodology had been employed in two earlier studies, both of which involved the authors: one examined drug use amongst primary school pupils in

slums (Szécsi et al. 2017) and the other concerned digital device use in early childhood education (Cziboly et al. 2023).

During the lockdown, there have been different attempts to use drama in the online space (e.g. Davis & Philips 2020; Lorenza 2020, etc.). Drama is a genre that requires co-creation in a shared space, so adopting it to an online modality where we had to work without spatiality or eye-contact was the key limitation of the research. Experiences from online teaching during the lockdowns (e.g. Cziboly & Bethlenfalvy 2020) have been utilized.

We conducted three focus group sessions with 16 pupils (4 boys and 12 girls) in July 2020. They joined to the research on a voluntary basis and have been recruited by the organization of the third author from three rural counties. The ages of participants ranged between 11 and 15 years with one exception (the 6-year-old sibling of one participant also joined on of the groups), and they came from different socioeconomic backgrounds. All focus groups were conducted online by the second author. Focus groups were anonymous, and pupils joined the online meeting with avatar names and had the opportunity to turn off their cameras. The focus group sessions were conducted according to the scenario outlined in the Appendix (available online).

Huser, Dockett, and Perry (2022) emphasize children participants' rights to both informed assent and indication of dissent. A written consent was requested from the parents prior to focus groups, where parents were briefly informed about the aims and the methodology, that audio recordings will be deleted once analysed, and we do not collect any personal data, so children will not be identifiable. Children were also offered the possibility to leave any time.

Coding the participants' answers was carried out partly according to the guide offered by Global Kids Online (2016), partly in an inductive way, considering the patterns emerging from the text. The summaries were illustrated with quotations in a few places; these are not precise quotations, rather general summaries of several answers. The names, places, ages and all personal data that could be used to identify the participants have been changed.

Results and discussion

Experiences with distance learning

Distance learning versus going to school

About 50% of participants were happy with distance learning, and the other half would have preferred going to school. When it came to the advantages, participants from all three groups mentioned that they did not have to go to school, they did not have to wake up early and their daily routine was freer as they could learn whenever they wanted to. One participant also remarked: 'I liked that I did not have to meet a lot of people'. The disadvantages varied significantly more. The pupils mentioned missing peers and friends, missing sports and the act of walking to school. Most participants mentioned that it was difficult to understand the subject material, and also teachers were not really teaching classes in most cases and were often unavailable. Online education often felt chaotic for pupils: 'We had to download a lot of apps for no reason'.

The extent to which a given subject could be learned from textbooks depended on the subject itself, too. Whilst 'in Geography, the textbook explains everything, we

learn it and we'll know it', Mathematics and foreign languages are skills that need to be practised. For most students, these two subjects posed the most difficulties.

All pupils had phones but only those coming from better-off families had laptops. Poorer students took part in education and online activities with their phones. This reflects the trends highlighted by Iivari et al. (2020): the abruptly forced digital transformation has reinforced digital divides that already existed. The majority had no issue with adapting to the new situation. There are only two recalled difficulties: they both had problems with learning to use a certain app and had not received any help.

The amount of assignments

Participants almost unequivocally agreed that teachers had assigned them much more tasks than before. Whilst 'disciplining takes up a lot of time in a normal class', during the lockdown, teachers seemingly thought that pupils had much more time. Most pupils felt that this increase in workload was burdensome, and all of them thought that the learning materials were much more difficult to understand. Participants in all three groups remarked that there had been significant differences between the subjects, and some teachers assigned way more work than others.

All participants said that they had spent significantly more time in front of a screen. They used several platforms: 'We had to keep checking every app because tasks could have been assigned at any time of day'. Many pupils said that before the lockdown, they could not use their smartphones during the day, only in the morning and in the evening. But after switching to online learning, 'we spent way more time on our phones because we were at home, and nobody checked on us'.

Several kids used this 'legal' screen time for having fun: 'I often pretended to be learning but I was playing Brawl Stars. Others did this, too'. Since besides playing together, keeping in touch with others also took place online, the screen time allocated for learning often overlapped with playing and chatting: 'We video chatted more than ever'.

Only one of the 16 participants felt she had spent less time learning than before, and others complained that they had to spend way more time learning. One of them said that to him it felt he had been studying three times as much.

The competence of teachers to adapt

All participants said that 'teaching' almost exclusively consisted of assigning exercises to be solved and returned; no real education took place: 'They didn't really ask questions or explain anything, they only told us what assignments we must do. Sometimes we got an instructional video. We didn't understand the material. (...). I think most teachers did not even teach'.

Pupils from a village school said that they did not even receive assigned tasks daily, only once a week. In all three groups, several pupils mentioned situations when they had asked a teacher for help, and all they had received in response was 'Read the textbook again'! Another pupil complained that he had only asked for the access code to the Google Classroom group and had not even gotten an answer to that.

There were some exceptions in all three groups. There was a teacher who tried to explain the material on the telephone when he was asked to, and others sent voice files or tried to teach in the same way they had before on platforms like Discord.

Platforms

Pupils experienced two different kinds of pedagogical strategies. In some schools, all assignments were 'uploaded to a website and you could download them from there' on a daily or weekly basis. In most schools, however, every teacher assigned and collected exercises on *different* platforms. The 16 participants mentioned the following 9 platforms: Kréta (the electronic administration platform used in Hungarian public education), Google Classroom, Discord, Redmenta, Zoom, Facebook, Gmail, Messenger and MozaWeb. Participants disagreed on which platforms were the best. Participants thought using Discord and Zoom - the platforms suitable for live teaching - would have been the most important in foreign languages and math.

Assessments

In all three groups, several pupils mentioned Redmenta as the platform used for assessments. Across groups, kids agreed that cheating was a realistic option: 'We video chatted with our classmates or Dad helped with the Physics test, and so on...' One pupil remarked: 'If you didn't cheat, something was wrong with you'. Some teachers found peculiar ways to compensate for cheating: 'The teacher gave worse marks to kids she knew weren't so good'.

Several pupils said they got worse marks because of technical difficulties. One of them said that the teacher had assigned a 4-page long copying exercise with a deadline of approximately 20 days. She did it that very day and then got a failing mark as the teacher forgot that she had handed it in. In other cases, teachers did not check their Messenger regularly and sent the answers to tests to the wrong addresses. Also, some teachers were very strict with deadlines and deducted half of the points if someone was even half a minute late.

Experiences varied as to whether it was possible to retake tests for better marks. Some pupils felt they had had more chances to improve their grades, and teachers had been more lenient with deadlines than before the lockdown. Others experienced the opposite: 'When I wanted to take an oral test to get a better grade, I couldn't just do it as before. I could not talk to the teacher in person, I could only send an email'. Grading had been erratic; sometimes home assignments had been the most important factor, and sometimes activity during class or tests had been given more emphasis: 'You never knew what to put more effort into'.

Risks of online activities

Harassment by friends on social media

According to most participants, it is more common to get harassed by people you know than by strangers. 'There are some weak people who like to be aggressive online because they would not be brave enough to do anything in person. And this makes them feel powerful'. Negative comments can range widely from remarks on someone's appearance ('your hands are ugly, you cannot dance') to verbal assault and threats. Simple misunderstandings can also escalate, especially when the receiving party misunderstands the message due to the lack of emojis.

Participants from a small village school mentioned a situation where the mother of a slightly overweight, lonely girl wanted to help her become more popular by

recording her as she danced and put it on YouTube. Opinions varied whether or not the girl was happy about this, some said: 'she did not mind because she wanted attention' or 'she was just having a good time, and her mom recorded it', whilst others noted that 'the whole school watched, and everyone was mocking her and saying it was gross'.

Negative comments sometimes show a complete lack of empathy. 'I have heard about a girl who went nuts after her mom died. And instead of offering help, others commented that they hope she would die too'. Participants admitted to often laughing at content depicting someone being humiliated. At the same time, they are fully aware that this hurts the other person.

Several children mentioned instances where someone uploaded a photo or video of someone else and tagged them without asking their permission. For example, many kids post awkward pictures on their peers' timelines on their birthdays to make them feel bad. Also, in some cases, children took photos or videos of others (for example, the 4-year-old brother of one participant) without them being aware and shared them online, sometimes after editing them with FaceApp. Others say it is much more common that 'they tag you when you are not even in the picture'.

There was a situation that started as a joke and ended up involving the police. An eighth grader was using the Facebook on a computer in the library. He went to the bathroom without logging out, and whilst he was away, another boy used his profile to write perverse messages to a girl. The girl cried and told her father who came into school and scolded the boy aggressively then proceeded to file charges. 'A policeman came to the school and told the culprit that if he had the nerve to write such things on Facebook then he should have the nerve to write them on the blackboard. The boy almost cried'.

Online interactions with strangers

Almost all participants said that they had been sent friend requests by strangers at some point. However, all three groups were quick to note that such friend requests should be deleted, and, thus, there is no problem. 'Once a lot of African men started to follow me. Around 20 per minute. (...) I deleted all of them and then nothing happened'. A high school student told us that his father – after telling her to come to him if strangers texted her – created a new account in secret and sent her a heart emoji. 'He wanted to test out whether I'd tell him. I didn't tell him; I only blocked the profile. Later he told me it was him. I was scared because I was only 11'.

Two groups mentioned dating advances on Facebook. In one case, it later turned out that the boy had another girlfriend, which was a big disappointment for the girl involved. As participants said, it is easy to manipulate online, anyone can post anything, and 'it's easy to play with words online, to make others believe what you want them to believe'. This typically involves older boys who target 13–15-year-old girls. Many participants warn that a lot of things should be discussed before meeting in person; one must get information on whether or not the other is a decent person. At the same time, it is not healthy to dig too much.

The more conscious children feel it is safer and more controllable when communication with strangers starts on an anonymous platform. One participant noted that anonymous commenting on Reddit can lead to a fruitful and friendly discussion without revealing one's true identity.

Online harassment by strangers

However, anonymous communication is not always safe. With the app Tellonym, someone with an Instagram account (with a name and a picture) can ask for anonymous feedback (how do I look? etc.), and followers can write anonymous answers. Most answers are typically rude and negative. Anotalk is another anonymous app where two random strangers are connected via the application. In one group, more participants mentioned a girl 'who was hungry for boys' and who supposedly had gotten to know someone via this app. Boys often use these platforms to write 'perverse' messages to girls. Even the 6-year-old participant had such an experience: 'We were watching videos, and a man wrote that he was coming for us. I got scared and ran away to Mom'.

Two girls recounted that several strangers sent them friend requests due to their profiles, but they deleted them. 'If you post pictures where you look attractive, you can even get a lot of nasty comments'. In some rare cases, anonymous comments can be positive. One participant texted girls who were her friends on Facebook anonymously write that they were beautiful, just to see their reactions.

One boy mentioned that he was once contacted by another boy on Messenger. He answered, trying to uncover who he was but that other boy was being mysterious.

> When he wrote that he would send a picture, I blocked him to stop him from sending me a... nasty picture. (...) Then he became my friend on Facebook as he had sent me a friend request. And I saw he was like 40 or something.

The boy deleted the man from his friends list and told his mother. The same participant recounted some other extreme experiences.

> There is a site called Chat Alternative, it's like Anotalk but with video. You cannot go online in the evening because there are 60-year-old perverts, and others, who kind of have a good time... Should I say it? They masturbate in front of the webcam and show it to others.

In the case of one of the girls, online harassment bordered on criminality: a boy she did not know sent her a friend request and then threatened to abduct her and murder her. 'I got really scared, I threw away my phone and the screen broke'. Based on his messages, he knew a lot about the girl and her family. After she told her father about it, he visited the boy at his home and filed a police charge. 'Dad was also really scared because he has three daughters'.

Parental involvement

We have discussed four instances of parents getting involved in their children's online life either voluntarily (the mother uploading the video of her dancing daughter, and the father testing his daughter via sending her a heart emoji) or out of necessity (the two fathers reacting to online harassment). In most cases, parental involvement is less drastic.

In one group, multiple 13-year-old participants noted that a lot of their classmates were being monitored by their parents who wanted to know who they chatted with. They disagreed with this practice and opined this was only reasonable until the age

of 10. There was some discussion over whether or not a parent is entitled to monitor their children's online activities. The participants concluded that parents could get involved if the kids agree to it, but this will likely end once these kids reach adolescence as they will be reluctant to share their passwords.

Several participants noted that they discussed problems of this nature with their friends instead of their parents. However, there is a consensus that parents should communicate with their children continuously. They should not question every step they take, but it is worth asking the child in an intimate situation what they usually do online or whether they have online friends. They also recommend parents make clear-cut rules (what they can and cannot upload, for example) and be available when there is something wrong when the child does not know something or is being harassed.

Conclusions

Participants almost unequivocally said that online education mostly consisted of assigning exercises; that teachers did not communicate with one another; and mostly gave more assignments than they had the time to cover in the course of 'normal' education. Whilst some teachers tried to help their pupils in this new situation, most teachers did not do so or barely consulted with them. In terms of assessment, it was rather uneven. It was easier to cheat on tests, but multiple participants recounted that in their final assessment, teachers often used earlier academic performance as a reference point. Almost all pupils sorely missed communication and being involved in designing the learning process. These results partially confirm the findings of a recent meta-analysis in the field (Betthäuser, Bach-Mortensen, and Engzell 2022); however, results also highlight the pupils' specific viewpoints in cardinal questions.

During online learning, playing online and keeping in touch with peers all took place simultaneously. Pupils *had to* register on several platforms, including some which, based on research, are known to pose risks such as Zoom (e.g. Kagan, Alpert, and Fire 2020) or Facebook (e.g. Dredge, Gleeson, and De la Piedad Garcia 2014). Pupils spent much more time online, typically on their own, without teacher's supervision.

In their free time, children mostly play, watch movies or videos and use social media platforms, but they might also use some potentially dangerous less-known apps such as Anotalk, Tellonym and Chat Alternative. All participants in all three focus groups were seemingly aware of the dangers and rules of internet use. Also, all of them had encountered situations where this knowledge had been needed. Several stories were recalled where pupils had been harassing each other online or where adult strangers had been texting the participants. Stories ranged from friend requests from unknown persons to middle-aged men sending perverse texts. In terms of cyberbullying, most participants only knew different types of teasing such as taunting someone in a comment or tagging each other on awkward pictures. Two more serious stories were mentioned; parental involvement was needed in both.

Knowing that during the lockdown, the adults normally responsible for the children during school hours (the teachers) practically left pupils to their own devices, and this situation seemed especially risky. Members of all three focus groups missed and advocated the need for regular communication with adults, that is, the teachers and parents. As adults only met the children's needs in part, they, in turn, also only followed the rules they otherwise knew well to a certain extent. It was this combination that might have led to the more serious cases.

Future research could compare the experiences of pupils and teachers, as teachers also experienced severe difficulties according to a recent meta-analysis (Ozamiz-Etxebarria et al. 2021), or even test drama-based methodologies where teachers and pupils could respond to each other's perceptions, interpretations and opinions in an anonymous online space. Research results could also contribute to the development of innovative drama-based interventions educating children to cope with online risks more effectively and assertively.

Declaration of interest statement

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to their containing information that could compromise the privacy of research participants.

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