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Distance learning in Polish secondary schools: Students' opinions during the Covid-19 pandemic

Abstract: The Covid-19 pandemic has caused the widespread implementation of physical distancing. According to data from UNESCO (2020), schools have been closed in 165 countries. Since 12 March 2020 in-person classes in schools throughout Poland have been suspended by the government. The Internet has always been under security threats, but has also enabled unparalleled access to information quickly. Thus, education has continued even in the face of such adversity. However, the teachers are confronted with many challenges and are constantly evaluated by their students. Herein, secondary school pupils' opinions on the quality of distance learning in Poland are discussed. Based on these comments, the unpreparedness and sometimes unwillingness of instructors to switch to an effective online teaching mode has been underscored. Other factors of online learning, such as the impact of a lack of interpersonal relationships and the incongruity of digital resources among peers have had on education and student morale, emphasize the magnitude of the pandemic. Nonetheless, these unprecedented times have provided a catalyst to change the education system by broadening the use of online learning in the future.

Keywords: Covid-19, distance learning, students' opinions, modern technologies

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Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has completely restructured the lives of many people across the planet. To suppress the spread of the virus, most national governments have temporarily closed educational institutions.¹ In March 2020, Polish headmasters were forced to switch curricula from in-person learning in schools to virtual learning at home. These changes in the educational medium have exposed many inequalities. Not only were the discrepancies in the quality of computer equipment and bandwidth available unveiled, but, most of all, to what extent self-education skills are necessary for proper learning were revealed. The present situation accentuates the importance of school as not only a place of intellectual development, but as a common space for student interaction, as well.

Modern technology has provided many tools to facilitate both the dissemination of knowledge and the forging of human relationships, even within a school community. Naturally, a situation in which thousands of teachers are forced to switch to online teaching without proper preparation, training, and often limited equipment will have an effect on the student evaluation of their abilities. Reading a few press articles or Internet users' comments on distance learning uncovers the challenges of online teaching in Poland during the pandemic. One quote highlights the unfamiliarity some Polish schoolteachers have with technology. »I have been explaining to my sixty-year-old [teacher] mom for three days what Messenger is, how to send a corporate mail, and how to institute a group on Facebook« (A teacher's... 2020), states one teacher's daughter.

It is particularly difficult to fulfil teaching duties when all interpersonal relationships must be transferred to a digital space. Further, mandating all teachers, regardless of age, formal education level, and digital proficiency, to handle every responsibility online associated with adequately mentoring contemporary youth is very strict. This mandate in Poland exposed gaping inequalities in the education system. There have been children without sufficient nourishment, equipment, and

¹ Interestingly, there is lack of evidence proving school closings were effective in preventing the spread of the virus (more in Viner et al. 2020).

Internet access.² Many otherwise great students have been placed at a disadvantage over other students simply due to limited online capabilities, as well.

Whether students can employ the assistance of their parents introduces another multi-faceted issue. Parents' level of digital proficiency and the amount of time they have could have a large impact on the quality of their children's education. Students with parents working on the front line or that have been directly affected by the SARS-CoV-2 virus may be placed at further disadvantage. Life during pandemic entails additional stress triggered by the fear of work loss, fear for family and friends, financial security and social isolation. A restricted or lack of access to mental health specialists can increase depression levels in population (Mertens et al. 2020). However, generally, young people are better prepared to use modern technology than adults.

Herein, we present and discuss the results of an enquiry about the quality of distance learning in secondary school students' opinion throughout Poland. The survey indicated that youth who acquire digital skills in early childhood cope better in a digital learning environment (Hurwitz and Schmitt 2020, p. 8). The participants also tended to negatively assess secondary schoolteachers' efforts to adapt to online instruction in this unprecedented time of suspended in-person classes.

Methods

Instruments and procedure

The present study employed a diagnostic survey. The survey was carried out on a small sample with respect to the overall amount of secondary schools in Poland. It may not provide a completely accurate statistical and quantitative comparison, instead providing only certain tendencies in teachers' assessment activities in the virtual space. The survey consisted of a questionnaire that was created and validated for this study. This questionnaire contained 21 mostly open-ended questions on distance education, enabling complete freedom of expression of the respondents. The survey was carried out using a Google Form between 14 and 30 April 2020.

² a) E-lessons continue; however, many children remain digitally deficient. The ensuing digital inequalities became considerably greater during the pandemic. These shortages in school equipment have resulted in a programme called »remote school«. Effective 1 April 2020, agencies can obtain funds for laptops or computers for students and teachers within the programme »Digital Poland« (Laptopy 2020). 90% of local governments as an authority conducting schools, submitted a motion for an endowment (Ptak 2020); b) Unequal access to modern technologies are a form of social inequality, which greatly impacts an overall sense of health. A limited access to modern technologies with an unlimited access to the network is equivalent to a restriction on services, informational resources, and maintaining social contacts (more about the subject matter in Beaunoyer et al. 2020).

Aim of research

The objective of this research was to obtain secondary school pupils' opinions on the quality of remote digital learning in Poland during the Covid-19 pandemic. The following specific research topics were queried to the students:

- what educational tools have been used by the teachers during the online lessons (educational platforms, applications, social media, etc.);
- how do teachers verify their learning;
- if it is has been easier to obtain positive marks;
- what their thoughts on distance learning are;
- whether they have needed additional educational support;
- whether they have considered the time of transferring school activities to remote learning as wasted;
- what they have missed most during the suspension of in-person classes;
- how transferring classes to the online platform has affected their family relationships.

Participants

The survey consisted of 114 student participants (purposive sample). The survey was carried out fully anonymously. Among the respondents 59,6% were women. The majority (96,5%) were secondary school students who graduated middle school. The remaining group (3,5%) were students that entered secondary education directly after primary school.³ The age range of the participants was 16–19 years. Of the respondents, 50,9% were in their final year of secondary school.⁴ Importantly, 77,7% of students in technical schools are women. The participants were living in different environments with an accurate proportional representation from cities.⁵

Results and Discussion

In the first question the respondents were asked to indicate the tools used by teachers during online learning and the frequency of their use.⁶ Accordingly,

³ In Poland, the gradual phasing out of the older education model, generally referred to as »6 + 3 + 3«, began from 1 September 2017. The previous junior high schools were replaced with eight-year primary schools, covering two levels: ISCED 1 (primary education) and ISCED 2 (lower secondary education).

⁴ In the Polish education system, secondary school, including general secondary school and technical secondary school, carried out after junior high school, was classified as ISCED 3 and included students aged 16-19.

⁵ Village: 42.1%; town up to 100 000 inhabitants: 43.9%; city over 100 000 inhabitants: 14.0%.

⁶ The respondents were asked to indicate the frequency with which particular tools were used with the possibility of mentioning additional ones. The probed applications included: electronic journal, e-mail, Google Hangouts Meet, Moodle platform, Messenger, Teams application, Google forms, Google drive, Linoit board, Zoom, Learning Appss, school textbook publishers' websites, scholaris.pl website, and Webex.

the most frequently employed tool was the e-grade book.⁷ This was not surprising as schools have no longer had to use paper documentation for grades since 2009, hence all the schools had already implemented this method.⁸ The other frequently listed learning tools were e-mail, Teams, and Messenger. No students reported the use of Linoit board or the Scholaris.pl portal. Importantly, unfortunately, the LearningApps portal, a tool enabling the creation of educational interactive games,⁹ was also not reported to have been employed. The LearningApps portal is free and has had a Polish language version available for many years. Its goal is to engage youth by the creation of games based on the content of the students' lessons. This survey result suggests that young people perceive traditional teaching as boring and ineffective. The reality in Poland is that the teacher is still a dominant force in the classroom. They tend to use traditional methods to teach while students are left with the difficult task of absorbing this knowledge on their own (Wysocka and Tomiczek 2014). On the other hand, students find interactive lessons engaging. Gamification supports abstract thinking and has had a significant influence on acquiring knowledge. There has been a positive correlation established between incorporating game development into teaching and level of knowledge (Putz et al. 2020).

The prolonged length of e-learning has forced teachers to assess their students' work by some means. From 25 March 2020, in accordance with the Minister of National Education,¹⁰ teachers have been allowed to give marks. Therefore, respondents were asked if they had been graded as a metric for assessing knowledge acquisition. The majority of the surveyed students (61.4%) replied that their knowledge had been assessed via the Internet.¹¹ Comments left by students that replied »other« (8.8%) have been summarized here. Some students reported only short-term tasks with an unusual grading system. Some students stated that only homework was marked. Other students reported that they were told, without explanation, that they had to get grades in school and there would be such a possibility as soon as in-person classes restarted. When these students asked what would happen if in-person classes did not restart, they did not receive answers. The respondents who answered that they had received grades were asked to indicate the subject and the tool used by the teachers to do so. English was the most frequently mentioned subject. Additionally, Polish, mathematics, physics, safety education, and geography were named. E-mail was the device employed most often: the student

⁷ The exact application employment data were: electronic grade book (52.6%), e-mail (15.8%), Microsoft Teams (15.8%), Messenger (14.0%), Zoom (8.8%), Google disc (5.3%), Moodle platform (3.5%).

⁸ The regulation by the Minister of National Education of 16 July 2009 changed the policy on how the teaching process, pedagogic and tutelary activity, etc. be documented by public kindergartens, schools and institutions (Dz.U.(Journal of Laws) 2009 number 116 position 977).

⁹ An additional advantage of the portal is the possibility to create a virtual class.

¹⁰ The regulations by the Minister of National Education of 25 March 2020 changed the temporary restrictions concerning particular solutions (e.g., the allowance of grade assignments) in the functioning of the educational system in connection with preventing, counteracting, and fighting COVID-19 (Dz. U. position 530).

¹¹ One should emphasize that the survey was finished on 30 April. Due to the continued suspension of school lessons, one can surmise that the proportion of teachers assessing the process of acquiring knowledge remotely is increasing.

e-mailed pictures of the work done. Some work, such as tests, had a clearly defined time frame. Importantly, the students did not list learning tools such as Microsoft Forms, test portal, discord, test portal, quizlet, and quizzes as being employed. Such use by the Polish teachers would have indicated better integration into the digital teaching environment. Students commented that it was very easy to cheat because there were limited forms of the tests so screenshots with the answers could circulate among peers.¹²

The third question asked students to comment on the ease of acquiring positive marks. A large majority (71.9%) stated that good marks were easier to obtain during remote learning, while only 5.3% expressed the opposite opinion. A considerable portion (19.3%) were undecided or felt it was the same as in-person school. The remaining (3.5%) indicated »other«. One pupil remarked it was very easy to obtain high marks because students would write the tests in digital groups and obtain the answers through payment to a source with access to a given learning *there is no comparison, a test written for two days because such a deadline was set by a teacher is not a test, now getting a good mark is a piece of cake, teachers do not control what we are doing, for example, during a test, we usually solve it in a group via a communicator, we use our acquaintanceship with digs, access to portals in which after paying a few zlotys you have an access to the majority of answers.*

In the fourth question students were asked to express concerns about distance learning. The responses generally did not directly answer the question and tended to focus on general conveniences of being at home. The possibility to get more sleep, to have more free time, and the freedom to choose one's own surroundings for learning (e.g. in bed) were common non-quality-of-education-based responses. The comments students made that did relate to education were concerned mainly with the ease of achieving high marks and that the inherent extra free time made preparing for the school leaving exam easier. Among the negative opinions, responses suggested that there was a significant overload of material and homework coupled with too little teacher engagement, creativity, and explanation. A recurring undertone implied that the Polish schoolteachers were not making a *bona fide* effort to instruct, but still demanding quality work and long hours from their students. Further negative opinions on distance learning concerned the loss of direct interpersonal contacts both with teachers and peers. These sentiments showed that young people do place significant value on personal experiences with both teachers and students. Final criticisms related, in general, to technical problems surrounding Internet connections and general media accessibility. More specifically, these comments underscored that poor audio and video quality was a key contributor to their dissatisfaction with remote learning (Raes et al. 2020, p. 14).

These statements, coupled with the limited tools employed by instructors, demonstrates that the level of communication and dissemination of knowledge through distance learning is not tantamount to the levels achieved by in-person classrooms. Kucuk and Richardson (2019) have shown that a well-designed interface for distance learning considerably affects the emotional involvement of the

¹² 61.4% of the respondents listed the subjects in which they were assessed by a teacher, of whom 77.1% listed the applications used for the assessment.

students in learning and increases their contentment as well. Additionally, the implementation of online tools to best compensate the loss of face-to-face interaction found in a traditional education environment can also increase an individual's motivation for learning (Sun and Hsu 2013). Repeated frustrations described by the respondents were centred around unrealistic expectations and inadequacies of the teachers to perform their duties remotely. As a result, there is strong evidence that improving teachers' digital proficiency in Poland will have a very positive impact on student learning. To that end, it would be highly beneficial for teachers to be able to improve their digital acuity in case the next school year starts remotely. Only 3.5% of the respondents regarded the digital learning experience as »very good«. Further, grades of »C« dominated (40.4%). Considering the present circumstances under which the school communities are functioning, it could be fair to consider the possibility of implementing a hybrid learning style permanently—teaching through a combination of off- and online spaces that can go virtual in case of an emergency, epidemic, or pandemic.

In the fifth question, respondents were asked to list which subjects they liked most and which they liked least. Among the subjects they liked least were general sciences, primarily as a result of not understanding the content. Further, only 17.5% of the surveyed students said they could »always« rely on a teacher's help and only 45.6% said »often«. Additionally, the subject of physical education was also mentioned as difficult to realize in remote form. Students' dissatisfaction with the physical education lessons was directly connected to the teachers' involvement in taking care of the students' physical well-being. Students tended to be sent exercises to be done at home and then merely reporting their results to the teacher as the only or primary means of monitoring their engagement in the class. The subjects mentioned as the easiest to learn via Internet tools were Polish and history, explained by the fact that these subjects involve mainly mastering the content through reading and memorization.

Relating to question posed above surrounding difficulties in understanding the content of some subjects, the respondents were asked whether they attended private lessons. Of the respondents, 45.6% stated that they had not attended private lessons because it was not necessary, 19.3% did take online private lessons, 7% meet a teacher personally, and 28.1% did not take private lessons because they had no possibility. The percentage of students that could also rely on their parents' help was 54.4%. Those who had the privilege to enlist their parents' assistance were of the opinion that it was beneficial to their comprehension of the subject matter.

When queried about specific measures their parents' had taken to ensure a productive learning environment, the most frequent responses from the students regarded securing the necessary equipment, creating a private and silent study space, and limiting household chores. The last remark is of particular interest as it suggests parents' have accepted that their children have a greater workload when they are e-learning than when they are at school. The respondents also noted that their parents provided the financial means for the private lessons. Participants also mentioned their parents provided mental support (31.0%). Among pupils that indicated a lack of parental assistance (45.6%), the primary comments were a lack

of need for assistance or a desire to complete the material unassisted to better improve their learning experience. Some students did describe a lack of knowledge by their parents as a reason not to ask them for assistance.

Despite a generally bad assessment of distance learning, students generally did not regard the school year as lost (45.5%) or were neutral (19.3%). They emphasized that the curriculum was still covered and in some cases even more material was discussed. This accentuates that students who want to learn will acquire the knowledge regardless of even a pandemic vastly complicating their education. Among the respondents that regarded the present school year as lost, the majority were students in their final year of secondary school study. Their concerns centred around the loss of graduation social activities and inadequate time and knowledge required to prepare for the crucial end-of-year exams.¹³ Importantly, digital learning cannot provide sufficient training in vocational subjects, which form an integral part of education in technical schools. Lastly, participant responses that regarded this year as lost did not see postponing holidays as an acceptable solution.

The participants were also asked what they missed most as a result of the suspended lessons. Only 3.5% replied that they do not miss anything, but those that did, cited the silence, lack of inherent in-person school stresses, and the possibility to devote more time to their own interests as the reasons. From the remaining 96.5% of respondents, one can conclude that they acutely felt the lack of direct contact with their peers and teachers (they wrote: *I can't see my friends; I miss direct contact with teachers, friends; I want a conversation looking someone straight in the eye*). Given the fact that students attach huge value to personal contact, these concerns are not surprising. The statements from respondents included fears that social distancing could be prolonged considerably (17.5%) and, in an extreme case, for life. Young people have clearly been depressed and frustrated with this situation and indicated they needed mental support. There was considerable concern among participants for their own health or that of their relatives in risk groups (47.0%). Many respondents also expressed anxiety resulting from tenuous family financial situations stemming from the economic impact of the pandemic. Some students (7.0%) were physically afraid of the sanctions imposed to counteract the spread of the virus. This included sanctions that would place an absolute ban on going outside and a fear of these sanctions continuing for a long time.¹⁴ Many pupils (31.6%) were anxious about the school-leaving exam. Importantly, part of the questionnaire was distributed at a time when the date for the school-leaving exams was not yet set. Further, anxiety felt by the respondents was spurred by the possibility that these graduation exams would be cancelled altogether or a dramatic extension of the school year would occur, thus, delaying matriculation.

The prolonged social isolation also affected familial relations, both positively and negatively. Some individuals felt a strengthening of their familial bond, while

¹³ In addition to secondary school graduates, earlier-year students spoke up, as well. They justified their opinions on the lost year by a low quality of the distance learning (27.3% from the group that regarded the present school year as lost).

¹⁴ The answers correlated with the length of the continuing pandemic, as well as the restrictions and medical hazards of family and friends connected to it.

others noted it suffered as a result of the dramatically increased time together. Noted alcohol abuse by some parents was also anxiety-inducing.¹⁵ This last response is troubling as it underlines that forced isolation poses a greater threat to individuals devoid of the necessary support networks.¹⁶ Only a small group of respondents (10.5%) did not perceive large alterations to their intra-family dynamic, which correlated to secure employment of their parents.

As a result of the imposed restrictions, youth must spend their free time at home. Importantly, nearly half (43.8%) of survey participants were expected to write a school-leaving exam, which might have led to pupils to provide a different response than they would have in other years. Nonetheless, 54.4% reported playing computer games, 29.8% read books, 22.8% watched films, 3.5% listened to music, and 3.5% did physical exercises. Noteworthy is the large percentage of participants that recorded playing computer games. Of course, some video games promote learning, problem solving, and the development of motor skills and coordination. However, the most popular games among youth do not—in some cases can causing psychological and behavioural problems.¹⁷

An online survey conducted in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland probed the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on education from the viewpoint of parents, students, and school staff. A random sample of 7100 people were asked (Huber et al. 2020). Similar to the results of the Polish questionnaire, the students felt overburdened learning remotely as did the parents. These sentiments were more prevalent in the families of younger school children, as these parents felt obligated to participate in their children's learning as well as their own profession. Further, analogous to the survey in Poland, participants noted deficiencies in equipment both in schools and households. About 10% of parents shared these shortcomings like their student children did. However, as discussed, the solitary nature of e-learning does promote accountability for the knowledge by the students. In Germany, Austria, and Switzerland, teachers' digital proficiency was assessed in different ways. Teachers more willingly accepted working remotely, but only out of respect for social distancing: students indicated 40% of the teachers still did not take advantage of the available e-teaching possibilities.¹⁸ The persisting state of closed schools induces high stress into the participants' educational process. This is undoubtedly a major factor globally, independent of geographical position.

¹⁵ In response to the question: »How has increased time spent within a household affected familial relations?« 40.4% of the respondents answered that nothing had changed; 38.6% indicated positively, due to frequent conversations that tightened family ties; 21.0% indicated negatively, due to arguments that triggered further conflicts.

¹⁶ Izabela Żbikowska from the »HumanDoc« foundation says that this effect of the lockdown is visible and concerns all countries in which an element of social isolation has been implemented. She elaborates that a growth in violence ranging from 30 to 50% has already been confirmed in France, Great Britain, China, Australia, Spain, and New Zealand. This issue was not raised by the Polish government (Dobkiewicz 2020).

¹⁷ From 2018 *Video Game Addiction Is A Mental Health Disorder According to WHO* (Addictive 2018).

¹⁸ The proportion of digital classroom teachers: 10% none; 21% a small group; 9% half; 35% majority; 22% all (ibid).

Conclusion

As a result of the current situation, schools were forced to decide between e-classes or the loss of a few months of education. The choice to segue to online learning is not devoid of shortcomings. Evidently, the dominant pitfall is that a considerable group of students have been in unfavourable home situations and have fallen behind without the adequate tools for work and support. Children and youth from »privileged« backgrounds more easily access the available learning tools. They have sufficient financial support from their parents, by way of private tutors, for example. The students that cannot obtain such resources face many challenges. The pandemic has had extensive implications resulting in jobs losses and rises in food prices caused by drought, leaving many families without the financial buffer necessary for peace-of-mind. With such crises a significant possibility, keys to educational success may not hinge just on availing technological resources to all students, but also by facilitating a vested involvement and emotional interchange between students and teachers (Sęk 2000, p. 99). Crucially, the present situation necessitates equal collaboration between students and teachers.

Technology has undoubtedly facilitated education during the pandemic; however, implementing modern technology into e-learning requires adequate training to motivate self-study (Surma and Kirscher 2020). Further, rigorous self-accountability in these times is enormously important as digital regulation by teachers is exceptionally difficult. With a lack of direct interaction, some students struggle to motivate to acquire the knowledge, even if teachers put in a *bona fide* effort. A student can join a digital meeting and then recreate simultaneously, for example, as has been noted (Łupak 2020). It's an example of multitasking. Strategies to mitigate desires like these will have important implications on the welfare of students' education under a remote setting.

Multitasking is defined as the simultaneous performance of tasks. It has become entwined with the spread of technology as the world becomes increasingly digitized. Naturally, young people are affected. Research shows a negative influence of multitasking on learning (Bowman et al. 2010). Methods to discourage multitasking and to encourage quiet study will be crucial to the successes of e-learning and improved self-motivation of students.¹⁹

Digital education platforms have clear advantages in classrooms and remotely. These platforms enable quick access to educational materials and exams without the need to photocopy them. A well-designed e-lesson facilitates marking, allowing students to learn more easily. Although the pandemic has completely disturbed the education process, it has only really affected traditional classroom teaching methods. The doors have, thus, been opened to revolutionize education by incorporating digital aspects into learning both at a distance and in-person. Such changes are needed in the Polish education system.

¹⁹ The survey implied that male students during online lessons showed lower efficiency in effective regulation of their attitude and counteracting distractions while learning (Alghamdi et al. 2020).

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MNENJE POLJSKIH SREDNJEŠOLCEV O UČENJU NA DALJAVO MED PANDEMIJO COVIDA-19

Povzetek: Pandemija covid-19 je privedla do vsesplošnega izvajanja ukrepov fizičnega distanciranja. Po podatkih UNESCO so v 165 državah zaprli šole. Tudi poljska vlada se je 12. marca 2020 odločila za prekinitev izobraževanja na šolah na območju vse države. Internet, ki so ga nekateri že od nastanka predstavljali kot vir številnih groženj, hkrati pa nepogrešljivo orodje za dostop do informacij, je omogočil nadaljevanje izobraževanja. V tej novi resničnosti tudi učenci ocenjujejo učitelje, ki so prav tako izpostavljeni fizični distanci in novim delovnim izzivom. Ta članek, ki temelji na empirični raziskavi, vsebuje mnenja srednješolcev o kakovosti pouka na daljavo. Kritična mnenja nedvoumno izhajajo iz dejstva, da so njihovi avtorji povezani s sodobnimi tehnologijami in imajo neomejen dostop do omrežja preko lastne opreme. Pokazalo se je, da večina učiteljev ni pripravljenih na prehod na izobraževanje na daljavo čez noč, kar ni presenetljivo, saj so za kakovostno pripravo pouka na daljavo potrebne ne le veščine, ampak tudi načrtovanje in ustrezna priprava učnega gradiva. Velja omeniti, da pri šolanju na daljavo učenci pričnejo pogrešati stik z drugimi, z učiteljem, kar kaže na to, da imajo medsebojni odnosi pomembno vlogo, čeprav tega v običajnih okoliščinah morda ne cenimo v tolikšni meri. Očitno je, da bi lahko ne glede na različna mnenja o pouku na daljavo, ta lahko služil kot katalizator sprememb na področju izobraževanja.

Ključne besede: covid-19, pouk na daljavo, mnenja učencev, sodobne tehnologije.

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