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Grzegorz Godawa

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2283-3965>
Pontifical University of John Paul II in Krakow, Poland
grzegorz.godawa@upjp2.edu.pl

“A FORCED, NECESSARY INCONVENIENCE” – DISTANCE LEARNING IN THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC SITUATION FROM THE PARENTS’ PERSPECTIVE

„WYMUSZONA, KONIECZNA NIEDOGODNOŚĆ” –
ZDALNE NAUCZANIE W SYTUACJI PANDEMII
COVID-19 W REFLEKSJI RODZICÓW

Keywords:
distance educa-
tion, parents, child,
teachers, COVID-19
pandemic

Summary: Parents involved in their child’s distance education process during the COVID-19 pandemic situation reflected on their acquired experiences and described them for this study. A qualitative analysis of 169 statements of respondents showed their critical attitude towards the way distance teaching is being implemented. Parents point out the inconveniences they face during their everyday help in their children’s learning process and organising family life. They assess the quality of remote teaching, highlighting its advantages and shortcomings. Respondents assess the teachers’ work thoroughly, appreciating their efforts but also pointing out deficiencies in their commitment and didactic skills. They emphasise the advantages of online teaching.

Słowa kluczowe:
zdalne nauczanie,
rodzice, dziecko, na-
uczyciele, pandemia
COVID-19

Streszczenie: Rodzice zaangażowani w proces zdalnej edukacji dziecka w sytuacji pandemii COVID-19 nabyli doświadczeń, które opisali w formie refleksji. Jakościowa analiza 169 wypowiedzi respondentów pokazała ich krytyczne ustosunkowanie wobec sposobu wdrażania zdalnej formy nauczania. Rodzice zwracają uwagę na niedogodności, z jakimi się zmagają w codziennym pomaganiu dziecku w nauce oraz organizacji życia rodzinnego. Dokonują oceny jakości zdalnego nauczania, podkreślają jego walory i mankamenty. Respondenci poddają wnikliwej ocenie pracę nauczycieli, doceniają ich trud, ale także wykazują braki w ich zaangażowaniu oraz umiejętnościach dydaktycznych. Podkreślają walory nauczania prowadzonego w formie online.

Introduction

Distance is one of the factors that have always hindered contact, trade and access to education. Man, in an attempt to oppose this, has for centuries taken various measures to reduce the severe effects of long distances. Among other things, this is how transport and postal services have developed, and following this example, also education termed as “distance”.

The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 has forced the application of social distancing, which can be seen as a particular kind of “distance”. It has become a difficult challenge for Polish society, including the education system. As a response to the problems that arose, a form of distance education was introduced to an unprecedented extent. This was made possible, to a large extent, by involving the pupils’ parents in the process of education, which put a heavy burden on the family system. The implementation of distance education took place in a crisis situation that was generously tackled by many education stakeholders, including students, teachers, representatives of the management staff and parents (Tomczyk, 2020).

The author’s research is aimed at exploring this issue, with particular emphasis on the opinions of parents about their experiences concerning participation in their children’s distance education. The statements were expressed in the form of respondents’ free reflections and subjected to qualitative analysis.

Outline of the development of distance learning

The origin of distance learning can be seen in the correspondence education that was initiated in the United States in 1728. Initially, distance education was in the form of letters, but it has over time been professionalised, standardised and finally institutionalised (Gurba, 2015). At the beginning of the 19th century, language courses were conducted in this form in the United States and Europe (Kurkowski, 2006). From 1858, this method of education began to be used by universities. In Poland, methods of correspondence learning were introduced at the universities of Krakow and Warsaw. In 1969, the British Open University was established in Great Britain, breaking down the barriers of academic education by introducing a full formula of distance learning (Heba, 2009).

The technological achievements of the 20th century meant that the development of distance education began to be even more dynamic and took on new forms. Radio and television became the new transmitters of educational content. Australia, where the so-called *School of the Air* was established in the early 1950s, was the pioneer in the use of radio for teaching purposes. It was used to educate children who were unable to get to school due to long distances (Konieczek, 2017). In a similar manner, audio-visual television broadcasts were used, and this form of education became increasingly popular from the 1960s. In Poland, an important step in the development of distance learning was the establishment of an educational television station called "School Programmes" involving many schools and academic centres, as well as the "Television Polytechnic" action in 1966–1971 (Konieczek, 2017).

A milestone in the development of the current form of distance learning has been computerisation and increased access to the Internet. The related development of new technologies has also contributed to the ongoing introduction of new methods to the model of general and vocational education (Smal, 2009).

Modern distance learning can be defined as a method of conducting the process of teaching in conditions where pupils or students and teachers are physically distant from each other. Instead of direct contact, indirect contact is introduced (Juszczyk, 2003). Distance learning includes forms of organisation and conduct of the process of educating (learning, teaching, testing knowledge and skills) which do not require direct contact between the teacher and the learner. Classes are conducted using information and communication technologies (Michałowski & Myka, 2014).

Dobromir Dziewulak (2012, p. 1), analyses the contemporary model of distance teaching and states:

Mass access to the Internet guaranteed reaching a large group of students without the need to construct dedicated technical infrastructures intended only for teaching purposes. Internet education can therefore be regarded as the current paradigm of distance learning. Unfortunately, posting only teaching content on the Internet does not guarantee success in education. The idea of education is not only about providing knowledge but also about monitoring and supporting the student in the learning process.

The paradigm of mediating distance learning on the Internet is associated with optimism, but also with difficulties that result from the lack of strengthening of the methodological dimension of this form of teaching. It seems that sometimes the implementation of distance learning itself is also a problem, especially when it is done in particular circumstances.

Implementation of distance learning in the COVID-19 pandemic situation

The implementation of remote teaching is a form of pedagogical innovation (Rozporządzenie MEN, 2002) containing modern solutions with regard to the curriculum, organisation or methodology aimed at increasing the creativity and entrepreneurship of students (Ustawa z dnia 14 grudnia 2016 r. Prawo oświatowe, 2016). Agnieszka Wedel-Domaradzka and Anita Raczyńska (2013, pp. 4–16) list a number of implementation principles concerning distance learning. Among them, the following recommendations addressed to teachers can be distinguished:

- Distance learning requires a transformation and adaptation of the existing resources and methods to the new learning environment as well as a change in one's own habits.
- Education changes the activity of both the teacher and the student. The teacher should be more motivated and focus on encouraging pupils.
- In the educational process, the use of diverse media is desirable because of the need to diversify resources. They are selected according to the educational situation and type of the audience.
- The teacher competencies that are important in distance education include those related to technical and IT matters, instructive, content-related, legal and moral ("netiquette") ones and those related to self-development.

As can be seen, the application of remote education requires considerable organisational effort, as well as a change in one's way of thinking about education. Therefore, it takes time and action to prepare all participants in education for this new step. It is sometimes particularly difficult to meet this requirement, especially when various determinants disturb the functioning of the society. Such circumstances occurred in connection with SARS-CoV-2 infections and the announcement of a pandemic in Poland (Rozporządzenie Ministra Zdrowia, 2020). The consequences of the pandemic covered many areas of social life, including education.

In order to minimise the negative effects of the pandemic, a form of distance teaching was implemented which has been obligatory in Polish schools since 25 March 2020, and its principles were established (Rozporządzenie MEN, 2020). The responsibilities of the school headmaster were defined; together with the teachers and in collaboration with pupils and their parents, the headmaster was obliged to organise distance learning for pupils. The headmaster, together with the teachers, also determines the weekly content of teaching taking into account the following: a) placing an equal burden of work on each pupil on particular days of the week; b) the diversity of classes on each day; c) pupils' different mental and physical abilities to make intensive mental effort during the day; d) the need to alternate teaching with and without the use of screen monitors; e) limitations related to the specificity of remote classes (Rozporządzenie MEN, 2020, § 1, p. 3).

More detailed solutions concerning the implementation of distance teaching were included, for example, in the ministerial instruction for schools. In addition to the guidelines on how to start and develop distance learning, the instruction includes a list of e-tools and e-materials to be used in remote work with pupils (Ministerstwo Edukacji Narodowej, 2020). Apart from the guidelines for the organisers of the process of education, the instruction contains information and recommendations addressed to pupils and their parents. The overall message for parents is: "In the current situation, learning at home is a necessity. However, it must be borne in mind that this special time should be devoted not only to learning but also to developing the child's passions and interests and to resting and strengthening family relationships" (Ministerstwo Edukacji Narodowej, 2020, p. 16). The diversity of tasks and nobility of the objectives placed distance learning among the most important undertakings that Polish society, especially schools and families, were to face.

Method

The research material was obtained through the use of an original tool developed within the framework of the project “Distance learning in a COVID-19 pandemic situation”. The study involved 358 parents of primary school children from forms 1–6. The study was conducted in April 2020 via an online platform. In addition to closed questions, one open question was included in the questionnaire in which the respondents could share their thoughts on the implementation of distance learning. This question was answered by 169 respondents and the data obtained in the responses were subjected to qualitative analysis.

The analysis was commenced from the level of the lexical frequency dictionary of statements (Bauman, 2001), as a result of which it was determined which words are most meaningful in the statements and which realities they affect. Then, the meanings of the words that appeared were identified and the context of their use was determined. In the case of the word “child”, the semantic field was also defined, which made it possible to approximate the meaning of this basic word. Figure 1 shows the 14 most frequently used words, grouped by unifying the grammatical forms, shown in the form of a tag cloud. The frequency of use of individual words is reflected in their font size and thickness.

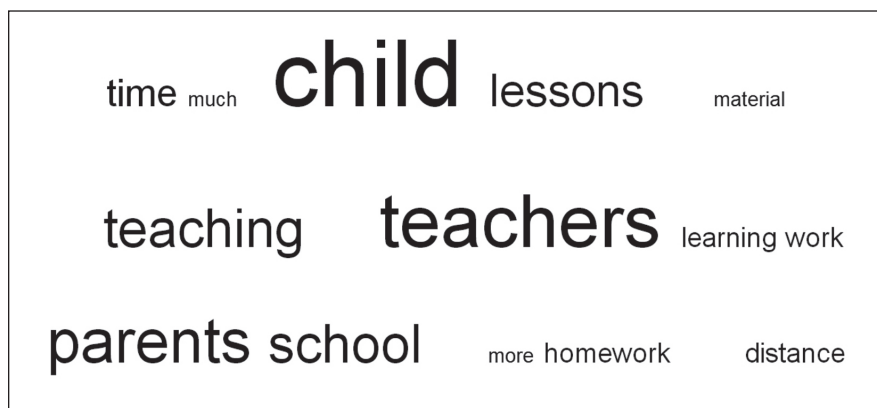


Figure 1.

Tag cloud: frequency of occurrence of individual words in respondents' statements.

Source: own work.

The data in Figure 1 show that the word most frequently used by the respondents was "child". The words "teachers", "parents", "school" and "teaching" were also important. Following this indication, the understanding of particular concepts and the contexts of their use were examined.

"Distance teaching will never fully replace traditional teaching" (F, 134)

In the opinion of the parents, distance teaching has qualities that are important, although not easily perceivable, which is why the respondents expressed their opinion being aware that they are opposing popular opinion on the subject. One of the reasons for such an opinion is the lack of basic information about this form of education: "Distance teaching is very controversial, e.g. in my children's primary school, because parents have very different ideas about what distance teaching should be" (F, 42). Parents' positive judgements are expressed in statements that treat distance teaching as an acceptable form of education in current circumstances: "At the moment, there is no other solution to this situation" (F, 45). It is also a way to keep the child busy: "At least they have something to do" (F, 162). This form of education has also been more appreciated: "It is ok" (F, 94); "The only right solution" (F, 103); "You can get used to it and work at a good level" (F, 76). There also appeared even more flattering judgements: "I am glad that there is such a possibility" (F, 75); "I am satisfied with distance education with our teacher" (F, 93).

Respondents perceive in this form of teaching an opportunity to develop "areas currently neglected in education that is mainly focused on 'teamwork', like e.g. the joy/skills of independent (sometimes) learning" (F, 4). Distance teaching is based on individual skills and self-study. Sometimes it brings surprising results: "Although this is a very difficult time for everyone, my child spends much less time learning because they prefer studying on their own and the materials sent by the teachers are absorbed faster" (F, 54).

Parents believe that distance learning allows their children to extend their cognitive perspectives. In this sense, it is perceived as "time for teaching children some sensible and necessary things, not a rigid framework written by someone" (F, 143). It can be assumed that these words indicate the possibility of a flexible extension of the current compulsory content of education. This is done in a friendly atmosphere where "children are eager to participate in different forms of teaching and are willing to accept novelty" (F, 24).

Another area that can be developed in the course of learning together with the child is the deepening of the parental identity: “I am delighted to have the opportunity to spend this time at home with my children. Thanks to distance learning, we spend time not only playing together but also learning together. I do not envy parents who cannot afford such a solution for professional/financial reasons. For me, this is a new and wonderful dimension of parenthood, although it is a shame that this is happening under such circumstances” (F, 108).

It is worth noting that the mother who says this devotes 4–5 hours a day to the education of her child, which, in the context of her statements proves that she does so without detriment to other areas of her activity. However, such a possibility is not a frequent resource among the respondents.

The list of benefits of distance teaching, as suggested by the analysis of the study material, is relatively long but is not supported by a significant number of statements. They represent the individual voices of parents showing that distance education brings real benefits for their children and themselves. These voices are very important because they show that, under the right conditions and with both parents and children being involved in the teaching, it is possible to benefit from the same. Particularly noteworthy are the statements in which respondents recognise the fundamental advantages of distance education which provided grounds for its implementation in many countries, not as a last resort for the education system but as a regular form of teaching used before the pandemic occurred.

Nevertheless, the research material is dominated by negative opinions about distance teaching introduced and implemented in the form that the respondents are confronted with. The analysis of the respondents’ statements indicates that it is the ministry, schools and teachers that bear the responsibility for the current state of affairs. Family-related determinants also contribute thereto. Criticism of the introduction of regulations concerning distance learning is expressed in stressing the inconsistencies in the current regulations and the pace of their introduction: “Our state has failed; they introduced distance teaching immediately, without considering whether pupils and teachers were prepared in terms of content and technology. The rules are ambiguous and thus interpreted in different ways” (F, 36). The idea of distance learning implemented in this way is seen as an “absolute failure of the Ministry” (F, 106). Another parent confesses: “We were not prepared for this. I have great reservations about the role of the Ministry of Education. I think there was enough time to organise it better” (F, 66).

The subjective evaluations of the implementation of the idea of distance education cited above cast doubt on the logic of the ministerial regulations, the purpose of which was to launch the only form of education possible in the pandemic. A critical parent notes: "If nothing has changed, we still have conflicting regulations; the first one suspended school classes, and the next ones told us how they were to be carried out – although they should not take place legally as they were suspended" (F, 8). These words refer to the situation at the beginning of the pandemic when the ministry corrected a previously issued regulation.

The research material is not lacking in criticism of the institution of the Polish school: "This situation reveals the shortcomings of the Polish school in general; it is worth looking into" (F, 148). Statements on the condition of the Polish school during the coronavirus pandemic show that the charges brought against the school are in fact charges against the actions of the government which defined the tasks of the school during the pandemic: "The Polish school is not at all prepared for the current situation. Nobody is interested in whether the child has his or her computer at full disposal or whether the family has access to the Internet (nobody asked us about this). No teacher has asked whether parents have the knowledge and abilities to teach their children" (F, 15). In most of the statements, criticism of the Polish school is only an introduction to an insightful look at the actions of teachers.

"The teachers that can cope with the classes are few and far between" (F, 82)

Positive assessments of the activity of the Polish school are largely due to the involvement of the teachers who "are constantly looking for new solutions and improving the methods" (F, 33). This optimistic vision of teacher development is based on careful observation of their work: "I appreciate the fact that teachers are trying" (F, 56). The need to appreciate the teachers who are dedicated and to collaborate with them, which in the case of remote teaching requires more effort than in normal conditions, is evident from the statements of the respondents: "This is also the time to appreciate dedicated teachers and to refresh the parent-teacher collaboration" (F, 148).

The effectiveness of teaching in distance learning is connected with the need to include modern methods of education which go beyond the popular method of sending teaching materials to students. Online teaching is most valued by parents. In their opinion, increasing the scope of application of this

type of teaching directly contributes to improving the quality of education and at the same time relieves parents: "Lessons are online, so it's great" (F, 149). "The children learn the curriculum, they are not overburdened with excessive work, have normal lessons, tests, projects and everything related to teaching. We parents do not have to do the teachers' work" (F, 156). Relieving the burden on parents is a benefit that they feel directly and highly value. In contrast to the labour-intensive and time-consuming homework done with the child, online lessons to a much greater extent reflect the traditional teaching model. This benefits both children and parents.

Unfortunately, a much greater number of statements show a considerably more negative image of teachers. There is no shortage of voices seeking a rational justification of the condition in which teachers found themselves. Respondents defending them draw attention to the fact that "teachers were forced to implement the curriculum without appropriate equipment" (F, 106) or to the lack of specific guidelines, which meant that "each teacher had to deal with the situation in their own way" (F, 5). All the more so because "the scale and speed of change have not allowed for a thoughtful and effective preparation of the teaching tools, and thus, it is not due to anyone's ill will. Every good project or action plan requires time and consultation with many people responsible for a given area of life" (F, 35).

Parents also direct their criticism directly to the school staff. They accuse school principals and teachers of negligence and errors in the organisation of the process of education in the form currently in force. In the first place, they complain about "too many different forms of classes, lack of uniformity and the informational chaos" (F, 10) that has prevailed in this organisation. It can be seen, for example, in the lack of uniformity of the platforms and messaging tools used: "Education has developed a lot by means of virtual reality and this can be utilised in many learning programmes. The plurality turned out to be a problem. Teachers did not choose just one or two specific platforms for communication and teaching. In addition, those used before the pandemic proved to be technologically insufficient, e.g. due to the lack of the option of sending pictures. Children, teachers and mainly parents were not trained to use such software" (F, 17).

Parents are stricken by the lack of methodical background to conduct teaching classes using modern programs. In the opinion of some of them, at the beginning of the pandemic, despite the atmosphere of haste, it would have been possible to provide some basic training on using educational platforms.

Another problem is that parents are excessively burdened with responsibility for their children's learning outcomes. Parents believe that the enormity of the material they work on with their children is due to a misunderstanding of their family situation. The problems include limited access to the Internet and the new technologies or the lack of an adequate number of computers in the home. The need to reconcile their professional work with educational tasks proved to be a particular difficulty: "There is no teaching; now it is parents who take over the role of teachers. Teachers provide some material to work on, and parents have to educate themselves on how to explain the material to the child and make them understand the subject. This is why teaching children at home takes so long. In addition, parents' remote work and the necessity to fulfil other tasks as well mean that many things are done at the same time, which affects the quality of children's work and also the quality of parents' work. Furthermore, we only have, or should I say we have as many as two computers, and two children go to school so they need a computer, and the parents also need a computer to work remotely, and all of this means a conflict. The child is 'set aside' because e.g. the employer needs a report. As a result, learning is spread out throughout the day and despite many efforts, we have never managed to do the child's homework before 5 pm, and believe me, I wake my children between 8 and 9" (F, 62).

The statement quoted above also draws attention to parents' insufficient competencies to implement the process of education. Respondents openly admit that in order to help their children, they have to put in extra effort in order to educate themselves. From a pedagogical perspective, self-education contributes to the development of adults, but when it is caused by necessity and takes place in a stressful atmosphere, its effects may be mediocre.

A significant difficulty signalled by the respondents is the extensive content of education and the large number of teaching materials that parents are forced to work on with their children. This excess gives rise to discouragement, especially when parents are unable to meet the requirements imposed on them. An additional source of frustration is the awareness that it is the children that suffer in the end: "This is a disaster. Almost every teacher sends out a lot of material every day and children do not even have time to play. It is worse than during school lessons..." (F, 110). "A lot of material, my daughter's head teacher restricts herself to sending her tasks to do, and we have to do them ourselves; at the end of the day we have to send her a report on how the child is doing" (F, 113).

A frustrated parent makes a bold assertion: “Some teachers catch up with their own work at our expense; children are given so many tasks that they are not able to grasp it” (F, 91). This suspicion is fully justified in the parent’s view, especially when she compares the amount of material before the pandemic and now.

On the part of teachers, an impediment that hampers them is the insufficiently mastered methodology of distance teaching observed in individual cases, especially at the level of the quality of the lessons they prepare and at the level of parent-teacher contacts. Parents are hungry for more online teaching, as it is perceived as a creative and activating form of education. It also has another advantage particularly appreciated by the respondents, namely that it reduces the scope of their own duties and responsibilities. Unfortunately, relatively few parents can enjoy the use of this form of education by teachers: “The reality is that only those teachers who have a fancy for doing so provide lessons online. In our class, these are just 4 people”. (F, 129). “There is a shortage of dedicated teachers who instead of assigning ‘tasks’ 2, 3, 5 and 8 on pages 23–24 would devote their time to preparing online lessons” (F, 153).

The shortcomings in the organisation and implementation of the education process presented above often make parents feel exploited and belittled. Laconic comments on what needs to be covered together with the child, the lack of personalised content and too cursory contact with teachers all mean that carers have a sense of being misunderstood. Children also feel this deficiency: “The material sent to work on in the form of links did not encourage children to learn at all. Among the teaching staff, only a few teachers took the time to produce some warm words addressed to the children in addition to the dull messages about the material to be covered” (F, 87). “Every day my child’s teacher sends a brief instruction, just a few sentences, about what to do. Her contribution to this ‘process’ is 10 minutes at the most. I am a teacher myself and I work almost all day, make videos, talk to pupils, check their notebooks, books, etc. I feel sorry that my child cannot have a teacher who is simply motivated to do some work” (F, 71).

These last words draw attention to the teachers’ personal commitment, which has a mobilising effect on all participants in the education process. The teacher making the statement is aware that a teacher’s commitment translates into the teaching process, especially by encouraging self-motivation in children. The lack of this engagement is demotivating. Meanwhile, one of the respondents notes: “Unfortunately, I have the impression that distance teaching is an

unpleasant punishment for some teachers" (F, 24), and another adds: "I think teachers might do something, really anything..." (F, 67). This sad conclusion is reinforced by a bitter remark from one of the parents referring to last year's teachers' strike: "They could strike without any teaching. And now they are inventing distance teaching, and nonetheless the children are still clueless..." (F, 155).

"Now it is parents who take over the role of the teacher" (F, 62)

The analysis of parents' statements on distance learning showed their judgement of this form of education and, indirectly, the strategies used by parents when confronted with stress caused by difficult circumstances. The analysis of the distance education assessments in this context is not intended to show its shortcomings, as this has already been done before, but it is an attempt to gain insight into the difficult experiences of parents. In statements referring to the term "distance learning/teaching", two main strategies for dealing with the situation can be distinguished, that is, confrontation and evasive behaviour (escape).

Confrontational statements indicate the negative effects of teaching and contain an evaluation of its quality. Teaching in the form in which parents participate is seen as "one big experiment" (F, 32) that is "only in its infancy" (F, 27). Therefore, parents' statements underline the futility of this form of teaching: "This form of teaching is not bringing proper results" (F, 125); "Distance teaching will never fully replace traditional teaching" (F, 134); "Such learning is not sufficient to absorb the core curriculum and new themes in the sciences" (F, 85); "Learning at home leads to nothing" (F, 80). A radical statement made by one of the respondents, "It incapacitates children" (F, 97), shows that in this person's view, distance education is, in fact, something harmful to the child.

The statements quoted above evidently display pessimism about the reasonableness of the basic assumptions of distance teaching, as the respondents assume that the form of education that was introduced is insufficient and, therefore, that the actions taken are pointless. It is worth stressing that such statements should be interpreted according to the key of assessing the quality of distance education in the form in which the respondents currently participate. This is confirmed by a critical assessment of the teaching process, often enhanced in the research material by the use of terms characterised by a high

emotional load, from mild terms, such as “I don’t like it” (F, 10) and “I’ve had enough :)” (F, 104), to radical ones, such as the following: “Total failure” (F, 157); “It’s a failure in general” (F, 166); “One big fiasco!!!!” (M, 83); “This is a disaster” (F, 110); “This is just a nightmare” (F, 121); “Hopeless” (F, 128); “This is a mistake” (F, 162).

The confrontation of parents with the form of distance teaching implemented in schools where their children are educated shows that this phenomenon places a heavy burden on the family and also triggers strong emotions. The disapproval of this situation is mainly due to the personal experiences of parents as educators of their children. Sources of opposition to this form of teaching can probably also be found in other reasons, such as the difficult conditions of the general functioning of families during the pandemic.

A slightly different shade of meaning was expressed by statements which expressed a clear desire to quickly put an end to the current situation of distance teaching. The difficulties involved as well as the aforementioned shortcomings make the current situation unbearable. Therefore, the respondents express opinions which seem to be a symptom of an evasive strategy for dealing with stress. They contain elements of wishful thinking, perceived as related to the regulation of emotions. These wishes are focused on one goal, that is, for the stress situation related to the pandemic situation and the accompanying distance learning to end as soon as possible. Here are some examples: “May it be over!” (F, 18); “May everything go back to normal soon” (F, 19); “I want this to be over” (F, 39); “Let the children go back to school” (F, 55); “I wish this had never happened” (F, 88); “Let them go to school” (F, 116); “I hope it will be over soon” (F, 138); “Let it be over so that they can go back to school” (F, 141).

Taking into consideration the statements that contain objections to the current situation and the wish that it should be over soon, we can see how heavy a burden it is for parents who have to function in the pandemic situation and, in particular, to implement distance learning under such conditions. These statements do not provide any rational ways of overcoming the crisis but there are attempts to gain control over this difficult reality by focusing on emotions, that is, by adopting a strategy with a low level of adaptation.

“There appears a problem in helping the child” (F, 79)

The analysis of parents’ statements has revealed another extremely important point. It can be assumed that it is actually the most important one, namely,

the child. When reading the statements of respondents very carefully, one can get the impression that they are mainly talking about their experiences and difficulties. However, by placing this issue in a broader perspective, the central place in the considerations should be given to the child, the pupil. The word "child" is the one most frequently mentioned in interviews as shown by the tag cloud. It also has a special meaning, which can be presented by analysing the semantic field of this word. For this purpose, the verbal context in which it occurs was checked.

In the vicinity of the word "child" there occur adjectives, possessive pronouns and numerals by means of which parents identify a child, for example, by distinguishing him or her from siblings, specifying age or family membership. The pronoun "my" is often used to refer to a child. It is interesting that the pronoun "our", which indicates the child's belonging to both parents, does not appear in research material in this context. This suggests a strong identification of the parent with the child and, given that the study group is almost entirely made up of women, also the way they perceive their maternal identity.

The semantic field of the word "child" also covers the area of its development. The nouns used by parents here include "development", "passion", "interests", "skills", "inspiration" and "*benefits*". Most often these terms refer to the education in which the child participates. It defines the context in which the nouns are complemented by verbs that refer to the child's activities, for example, "learn", "educate", "perform tasks", "evaluate", "work independently", "learn remotely", "deal with" and "communicate". This suggests that the development of the child is an important issue in the research material. Parents care about their child's learning progress and devote a lot of effort and attention to this goal. The respondents in this group see the positive sides of distance education and try to make the most of it.

In addition to the terms that appreciate distance education, there are also those in the research material that show the difficulties experienced by the child. The range of these terms is much wider, for example, "a source of frustration for the child", "the child is getting lazy", "is left on their own", "has no time to play", "is not motivated", "is bored", "is not interested", "is overloaded with material", "has to do homework", "has more schoolwork", "does not do everything by themselves", "is irritated", "is clueless", "has no established knowledge", "is handicapped", "irritated", "busy" and "does not consolidate knowledge".

Careful reading of these terms combined in the respondents' statements with the word "child" gives the impression that distance education during the

pandemic brings more harm than benefits to the child. What is more, it is a threat to the child. When listing the bad effects of distance learning, parents are convinced that radical changes in the form of its implementation should be made for the sake of the child. These are opinions based on familiarity with the child and on their own observations and educational experiences.

The last element of the semantic field of the word “child” includes expressions related to the support given to the child. Parents point to its practical forms, for example, to “sit down and study with the child”, “explain everything to them”, “work with them”, “engage”, “mobilise”, “devote a lot of time”, “speak warm words” and “make sure they feel safe”. These activities are the parents’ practical response to their child’s needs and the educational tasks they face. By actively participating in the child’s education, parents try to make sure that despite the pandemic the child feels safe, cared for, motivated to work, etc. These tasks take up a lot of time, and so, parents are tired.

To sum up the analyses made, it can be noted that the statements made by the parents are to a large extent centred on the child. The aim of their actions is to provide benefit and wellbeing to the child. This is the cause of much of the frustration among parents who, seeing the inefficiency of the distance learning system and feeling the other effects of the pandemic, are worried mainly about the child. Although the picture may apparently seem to be one of parents who are strongly self-centred and task-oriented, a deeper analysis of their statements reveals nuances suggesting a child-centred orientation of their thoughts, actions and concerns. This shows a keen interest in the development of the child in the context of their educational wellbeing.

Conclusions

The title of this paper refers to the statement by one of the fathers participating in the research, that is, “A forced, necessary inconvenience” (M, 29). These words refer to distance education and relatively accurately reflect the picture of education outlined in the respondents’ statements. Some parents believe that the introduction of remote learning, in which they unexpectedly became participants, was a necessary solution. Although there are many voices questioning the reasonableness of this form of teaching, the statement referred to is not a total criticism of distance learning. During the pandemic, “necessity” became the explanation for the many restrictions faced by individuals, families and the whole of society.

More emotions are expressed by the first word of the respondent's statement, which draws attention to the way the concept of distance learning is implemented. "Forced" means much more pressure than necessity. In the dictionary sense, coercion is understood as exerting illegal pressure on someone or an occurrence of circumstances forcing someone to do something (*Słownik Języka Polskiego PWN [Dictionary of the Polish Language, PWN]*). This perception of distance learning is clearly present in parents' statements. Challenging the legitimacy of the forced implementation of distance education is marginal; much more space and attention in the statements is given to the disapproval of the pressure applied. An important thread in the research material has turned out to be the criticism of the way in which distance teaching is implemented and carried out, especially the lack of consultation with parents, the failure to prepare parents and teachers or the not always top-quality way in which classes are conducted. This is probably the reason for the parents' disapproval and their rebellion against such functioning of distance learning. It creates many disadvantages for families. The burdens are troublesome to the parents because they add to their other responsibilities. These inconveniences are acute and widely described, especially in the context of professional work or the necessity to provide care for numerous offspring.

The pessimistic picture of the implementation of distance teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic must be complemented by a different perception of this issue. This form of education does meet the expectations of some parents. They are rarely satisfied to a high degree but in this situation, the average level of satisfaction also seems important. Appreciation of teachers' work, an understanding of the complex conditions of life in a critical situation and their own commitment warm up the image of education a bit. These are important statements because they show how important it is to get parents involved in the responsibility for their children's education, not only in terms of the necessary crisis measures but also by giving them a voice when the process is developing.

The study was carried out at a time when distance learning had become a daily reality for many Polish families but the process of adaptation to this form of education had not yet taken place. It is likely that further research will show more creative organisational and teaching solutions because during the pandemic, these areas have been significantly strengthened. Surely the fatigue due to the long duration of this period is a factor that will influence the evaluation of the teaching, but the experience gained by educational managers, teachers, parents and students will be of benefit. They can become an

important contribution to planning, if it turns out to be necessary, subsequent periods of distance learning. They can also contribute to the achievement of high-quality distance education implemented regardless of pandemic-related constraints because, as it seems, it has become a permanent feature of Polish education.

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