EXPERIENCES OF PARENTS OF FIRST GRADERS IN CZECH REPUBLIC PERCEIVE EDUCATIONAL PROCESS OF READING AND WRITING DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT

The period of the covid pandemic changed day-to-day full-time teaching into distance learning. Teachers, but also parents without any prior training, had to react immediately. What has long been theoretically talked about professionally, namely the use of digitization of teaching in the online environment, has suddenly become a reality. Long discussions about the innovation of the curriculum for primary schools in terms of the scope and quality of educational content were suddenly solved by the teachers themselves using their professional skills and experience. Most of the surveys show [22], [15] that the teachers handled this situation very responsibly and that it can be stated that they managed it within the specific possibilities.

Teachers, parents, and especially first-year primary school pupils had a very specific role during the pandemic, and thus the transition to distance learning. It is for this reason that we focused on this group, in our opinion the most affected by pandemics.

The present study describes the experience of parents with distance learning reading and writing in the first grades of primary schools at the time of closing schools in the Czech Republic in the school year 2020/2021. The aim of the survey was to describe the effects of distance learning on the development of initial literacy, the differences between day-to-day and online teaching; problems, challenges, pros and cons that the distance learning period brought. The research was carried out as a multi-case study, in which interviews were conducted with six mothers of children - first-class pupils. The results showed that distance learning did not affect the quality of children's acquisition of reading and writing techniques, it only slowed it down. However, there was a decline in pupils' interest in reading and a disruption of their relationship with education in general. It was difficult for parents to motivate children to learn, to help them in case of difficulties with reading and writing techniques, and to evaluate their learning outcomes. On the other hand, distance learning has made it possible to further

individualize education with regard to the needs of children and has deepened cooperation between school and family. Distance learning placed increased demands (physical and mental), especially on mothers, when it was necessary for their intensive involvement in the teaching process. Based on the evaluation of the course of distance learning, the paper brings general recommendations applicable to both distance and full-time teaching reading and writing.

Keywords: *Covid-19 pandemic, online education, first grade, reading and writing, pupils and parents*

INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 pandemic affected the whole world and no branch of human life remained intact, including education. Pupils and their parents got into situations in a very short time that no one had to deal with until then. Most such situations have, of course, been associated with great stress, fear of the unknown, and uncertainty [5], [9], [12].

The sudden separation from peers and the breaking of all ties affected the psyche of the pupils, who suddenly had to cope with completely different conditions for learning [4], [17]. Parents could help their children with the new situation, as [10], point out, if they set good conditions for education in households (especially thanks to digital literacy), a positive climate and a supportive approach [19]

Many challenges also awaited teachers who were thrown into the world of online teaching overnight, with which they had little or no experience until then [23], [11]. Primary school teachers consider the availability of facilities, network and internetwork, planning and evaluation of the educational process, and cooperation with parents to be the greatest complications that distance education has brought to teachers [8], [20] mention the positives named by primary school teachers - teachers appreciate the possibility of flexibility in performing work tasks, time flexibility, non-existent problems with transport to schools, more free time. They see the negatives in the loss of motivation to teach students, in problems with security in the IT-sphere and in increased costs for electricity and internet connection. [1] examined the success of the nationwide ‚School from Home' program in Indonesia through the views of primary school teachers. The survey showed that the project equipped teachers with technology and worked with them effectively, and ensured the cooperation and collaboration of all stakeholders - government, schools, teachers, parents and the whole community. Similar results are reported by three Chinese studies of the local project ‚School´s out, but the class´s on' [15], [25], [28]. In his quantitative study, [24] considers another question - whether teachers, in general, should be prepared to teach in extreme situations (pandemics, wars, natural disasters) so as not to interrupt the educational process, and such teaching means online teaching. The study shows

that many teachers have had problems with online teaching, and therefore this form of education should be given increased attention.

Parents, their children, and teachers had to adapt to a diametrically different style of teaching almost overnight, which logically brought with it a number of problems. Starting with the often missing or poor quality technical equipment, the need for space in the household and a change in the daily and often biological rhythm of life. Each family coped differently, but in some regions, the differences between pupils deepened due to socioeconomic status [14], [24] , [13], [18].

At the same time, materials were created to support families and schools [6], [21] but it is difficult to respond to rapidly evolving and changing situations, and so the ways offered to improve and streamline the educational process have not always been transferred into everyday reality.

The aspect of the transition from pre-primary to primary education is a major milestone for every child and marks a fundamental change in life. With the arrival of the first grade of primary school comes much more responsibility, more targeted work and the acquisition of core competencies, skills and knowledge. Pupils implement these with increasing time mainly through reading and writing. These basic skills are essential for functioning in society, and at the same time mastering them requires a lot of effort, time and help from adults, especially from parents and teachers. This concept was also significantly disrupted by the pandemic, making the earlier transition from kindergarten to primary school more difficult for all individuals, and even before the pandemic, pupils' reading and writing problems were addressed [7]. Of course, the crisis has exacerbated these difficulties.

The decline in skills and abilities associated with reading and writing, or with reading literacy and pre-literacy, manifested itself in pre-primary facilities as early as spring 2019 [2],[3]. Of course, parents and teachers also saw problems in areas other than reading literacy [26]

Pupils coming to the first grades of primary schools in September 2020 experienced the closure of kindergartens in the spring of 2019 at an important time in preparation for school, followed by unstable school year 2020/2021. Persistence and a regular regime in this critical period for children were completely lacking, as was contact with classmates. The difficult conditions certainly had an impact on the quality of the educational process in terms of teaching reading and writing, which may mean for the whole generation of children dealing with problems that no other generation had to face before them.

METHODOLOGY

The aim of the survey was to find out what experiences parents of first-class pupils have with teaching initial reading and writing in the 1st grade of primary

school during the combined teaching during the school year 2020/2021. The intention was to describe the challenges, demands, risks and benefits of distance learning for first graders and to formulate recommendations for future practice in mainstream education. We also planned to find out whether and how distance learning can influence parents' access to their children's education and children's independence when learning in the 1st grade. The answers to the following research questions were monitored:

Q1: How do parents evaluate the impact of the closure of kindergartens in spring 2020 on the preparation of children to start learning reading and writing?

Q2: How was conducted the distance teaching of reading and writing in the 1st grade and how did it differ from regular full-time teaching?

Q3: How do parents evaluate the impact of combined learning on educational outcomes in the field of reading and writing in the first grade of elementary school?

Q4: What demands did distance learning of reading and writing place on children's parents?

The research was conducted using a qualitative approach. The design of a descriptive multi-case study was chosen, which allows a better understanding and description of the issue [27], [22]. The comparison of individual cases brought the diversity needed to answer the research questions. By case, we mean a first-grade pupil and his parents. The individual cases were selected sequentially using the snowball method to contrast with each other within a defined conceptual framework [22]. It was formed by the socio-economic status of the family, the education of the parents, the size of the family and the reader's background of the family. A total of 6 cases were monitored, involving pupils and families from two different cities, from different primary schools, from different socio-economic statuses and from a different reader's family background. Data were obtained during March 2021. Below is a brief description of each case.

Case	Case characteristics
Case A	Boy, complete family, parents with a university degree, reader-friendly environment, older sibling
Case B	Girl, complete family, parents with a high school degree, less stimulating reading environment, older sibling, different mother tongue
Case C	Girl, complete family, parents with a university degree, reader-friendly environment, only child
Case D	Boy, complete family, parents with a high school degree, reading-friendly environment, older sibling - dyslexic
Case E	Girl, single mother, parents with a high school education, less stimulating reading environment, older sibling
Case F	Boy, complete family, parents with a high school degree, reading-friendly environment, older and younger sibling, early reader

Table 1. *Characteristics of cases from the research sample*

As a research method, semi-structured interviews were conducted with mothers of children; the interviews were recorded, transcribed according to the transcription standard [16] and subsequently analyzed using MAXQDA software. First, open coding was used, the codes were created ad hoc. Subsequently, the individual codes were grouped into categories and thematically coded, the individual categories were compared and grouped according to criteria in compliance with the research questions. The following categories were monitored: children's readiness for school, teachers' approach to teaching, demands placed on parents, children's reactions to distance learning, children's educational results in the field of reading and writing.

RESULTS

The interviews showed that parents of children and children faced similar challenges, although the initial starting situation of families was very different. It was possible to trace certain identical features in different stories. Parents differed in the evaluation of their children's educational results, which is due to the different dispositions and possibilities of the children. Nevertheless, their perception of distance education was in great agreement.

Q1: How do parents evaluate the impact of the closure of kindergartens in spring 2020 on the preparation of children to start learning reading and writing?

According to parents, the closure of kindergartens in the spring of 2020, at the time of preparing children from the research sample for school, did not have a negative effect on children's readiness, even in cases where kindergartens did not provide compulsory pre-school education at the time of kindergarten closing. It didn't even matter if the parents tried to prepare their children at home or if they left the child to its natural development. The parents agreed that their child was well prepared for school. According to the parents, the children's readiness was influenced by their previous long-term attendance at the kindergarten. The effect of the long-term development of the areas needed for the development of initial literacy was reflected in the fact that all monitored children before entering school recognized some letters, were able to distinguish the first vowel in the word, clap syllables, sign. Two children began to read spontaneously before entering school as they began to form words from letters.

Q2: How was conducted the distance teaching of reading and writing in the 1st grade and how did it differ from regular full-time teaching?

The answer to this question is related to the way schools approached distance learning. School approaches differed; some schools have only moved the whole teaching, including the timetable, to the online environment, while others have been looking for new ways to effectively teach children to read and write.

Parents greatly appreciated the approach of female teachers (there was no male teacher in the research sample). They praised the positive attitude towards children the most - they described the teachers as patient, kind and consistent (*"She is mild but consistent"*). They also appreciated their approach to teaching, which they characterized as diligent, honest and caring. Finally, the teacher's approach to parents was positively evaluated, when the teachers were willing to help and meet the parents' needs. *"Overall, the interest in the children and in us, and how we work, and if we need anything else, he tries to adapt us, his teaching, to burden us as little as possible so that it works. He finds out how the children did, what they enjoyed, they try to react to it."*

Parents' experiences of the quality of distance education varied; some did not notice a difference compared to full-time teaching, because in the online environment the teaching took place in the same way, ie for whole classes at once, using the same teaching materials (spelling books, copybooks, workbooks) and using the same educational methods. Other parents experienced that online education took place in smaller groups and that the organization of the whole education differed from full-time teaching. Some teachers responded operatively to the needs of children and parents by changing the organization of teaching over time.

Satisfaction of parents with distance learning varied, ranging from great satisfaction, through gratitude that at least *"it works like this, that the children are not completely without any opportunities to learn"*, to dissatisfaction due to overwork, excessive school demands and drill. *"As an overload of those children in the sense that I feel that what they get, what they have to process in that week, I think that if she worked with them at school, she couldn't do it with those children."*

In contrast to regular teaching, educational software was used in the form of interactive educational games or presentations. Furthermore, in the online lessons, the teachers explained the new subject matter (eg a new letter) and practiced with the children in the form of reading from the spelling book, where individual children were called out, writing on a personal board, dictations and completing tasks in workbooks. It is a standard content of full-time teaching, but not everything is suitable for an online environment. Reading from a spelling book is very problematic*: "In that hour, 5, 6, 7 children will be able to try reading. Not more, because when she asks someone to read a sentence and the child is slower, the time terribly flies."*. As a result, the children do not have time to take turns and sometimes do not speak at all during the online class. This leads to a loss of interest, attention and loss of meaning in trying, or disruption by children, and "it's incredibly wearisome". Furthermore, the deteriorating sound quality may reduce the ability to hear all of the child's errors when reading that the teacher does not correct. On the contrary, the organization of teaching in smaller groups, which alternate, has proved its worth. Thanks to the fact that *"it's in a smaller group, the children got involved more often"*.

Teaching reading and writing was a priority, most of the time was devoted to it, even more than compared to the usual schedule. The frequency of schooling varied; some children had it for one to two hours a day, others learned it three times a week in blocks, others an hour a day, but only in a small group where teaching was more intensive. In addition to reading and writing, time was devoted to mathematics; children did not have other subjects, or only marginally (English language). One child had a special classroom lesson once a week so that the children could talk to each other and share their experiences.

Q3: How do parents evaluate the impact of combined learning on educational outcomes in the field of reading and writing in the first grade of elementary school?

According to the parents, the teaching of reading and writing was not significantly marked by distance learning, because the schools were mostly prepared for it. According to parents, the need for distance learning has slowed children's learning progress in reading and writing. Of the sample, two-thirds of children read with difficulty and slowly. There are also difficulties with writing. On the other hand, parents think that children manage the demands of the first

grade well and therefore it is not necessary to repeat it or provide summer schooling.

However, distance learning according to parents also made it possible to more individualize education according to the needs of children, because education at home made it possible to respect the different work paces of children. Parents gained an idea of the course of their children's education and were able to provide them with support. Some parents stated that they had more time and peace to practice reading at home, which led to faster development of reading skills. However, these positive effects could only occur with children whose parents were willing and able to participate in their children's education. From the research sample, for example, a single mother who, at the same time as teaching her daughter, had to manage to fulfill her work duties.

According to parents, the disruption of children's relationship to education is a more significant consequence of distance learning than slower mastery of reading and writing techniques. "I would say that the loss of that children's motivation for education, that it disrupts the relationship to education as such at all, because there are often unpleasant emotions in it, (…) so I think it can disrupt the relationship to education as such, that it just bothers those children that they no longer have such a desire to acquire new things, because they have it connected with those negative emotions". The loss of interest is also reflected in a lack of interest in reading, especially in children who are learning to read by the analytical-synthetic method. These children have not known all the letters of the alphabet for quite some time and have a limited selection of reading comprehension texts. With the genetic method, the selection of texts is easier, and, overall, reading skills develop faster. All parents whose children are learning to read using the genetic method have stated that their children read with understanding.

More than the results of children, parents are more concerned about the disruption of the relationship with education and the decline of the child's social contacts. Parents reported that children had lost interest in learning, had mental health problems (sadness, frustration, apathy), were poorly concentrated, and lacked social relationships.

Q4: What demands did distance learning of reading and writing place on children's parents?

It must be said at the outset that in our research sample, distance education concerned only mothers, fathers did not participate. Mothers agreed that high demands were placed on them and it was often difficult to handle everything ("I feel that there is much loaded on us parents"). Teaching reading and writing seemed much more difficult to them than, for example, teaching mathematics, "one easily teaches basic mathematics, but reading, for me it was hell, then". Mothers lacked the knowledge and skills to help children read and write.

Mothers felt helpless not only in the area of teaching but also in the area of motivating the child to learn and in the area of evaluating the child's performance. Distance education of children also placed demands on the psyche of parents, most often they reported a problem with patience and managing their emotions. Parents themselves often felt frustrated and lost motivation: "I feel that every day is the same day, and I also have trouble forcing myself to force those children to learn. It's annoying."

Another significant problem was the organizational provision of teaching. The difficulties were not the provision of the necessary equipment (families owned or lent from the school), but the organization of space and time. In order for everyone to have space for work and peace and not be disturbed. "So now we're at one dining table, that I occupy one-third of the table, I have to have two monitors to work, and my daughter is here for the other two-thirds, she needs space, unpacks her exercise books and she's on the tablet." This is especially problematic in small apartments or with a larger number of children in the family. The parents agreed that it was necessary to organize the daytime differently and establish certain routines; those who did not do it, rated it in the interview as something they thought was necessary but failed to secure it. From the material conditions, families often solved problems with an internet connection, which was not of sufficient quality. This required, among other things, their constant presence in online teaching so that they could solve technical problems.

Parents, and most mothers, had to solve several tasks - to ensure organizational conditions (regime, space for learning), material conditions (technology, internet connection, printing materials or picking them up at school), motivate children to learn, assist children online ("I'm always with him in that distance learning, I have to be somewhere nearby because he loses concentration. When I leave, I see him not concentrating, jumping next to a chair, or lying on a chair, so I'm always around to tell him to sit down, listen to the teacher, see what he does, what he says "). In addition, they work with the children on further home preparation, elaboration or control of tasks and reading together. Most parents read even further with their children before going to bed. According to the parents, these entitlements require the child to be educated for several hours a day.

CONCLUSIONS

The results of a research survey generated a series of interesting communications, not only for school practice but also for the training of future teachers. Emphasizing the importance of the role of teachers and the need for universities of didactic erudition, professionalism, flexibility and creativity in the organization of teaching and optional educational methods. The research confirmed the role of parents as an important actor and partner of teachers in school as well as home teaching. Teachers and parents alike consider distance learning in the development of the beginnings of reading and writing to be a very demanding methodological-didactic, but also an organizational problem, in which

the solution is absolutely necessary for mutual cooperation. Teachers generally appreciate parents' efforts to motivate their children to learn, to maintain their interest, and to strengthen reading and writing at home using their recommendations. Parents especially appreciate the way in which teachers do distance learning together with pupils involved and methodically guided so that their joint action is effective, individualized and has a positive motivational effect. (Similar findings are evident from research conducted with primary school teachers.

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