

The Processes of Educational Communication in Primary Schools Determined by the State of Emergency in the Czech Republic

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Abstract

The paper focuses on the current methods of educational communication in primary schools in the Czech Republic. As a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, the educational conditions have dynamically transformed in our country. It has even been reported that pupils' absence from full-time attendance is the longest in Europe. Some pupils (including primary school pupils) have been taught online for approximately 10 months. This situation has had a significant impact on educational communication which is considered an essential aspect and means of effective teaching in primary schools. The paper reflects on the current level of educational communication between primary school teachers and their pupils.

Keywords: Teacher, Primary School, Communication and Its Function, Education, Covid-19

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Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic significantly affected the organization and the course of education on a global scale. In the Czech Republic, on 10 March 2020 an emergency measure was issued prohibiting the presence of pupils and students in elementary, secondary, higher vocational schools and higher education institutions which entered into force on the following day.

On 18 November, pupils in the first and second grades returned to their schools. On 30 November, all elementary school pupils returned. However, the subsequent pandemic situation significantly deteriorated and after Christmas holidays pupils had to stay at home again. They remained without school attendance until spring 2021.

This situation has had a significant impact on educational communication which is considered an essential aspect and means of effective teaching in primary schools. The paper reflects on the current level of educational communication between primary school teachers and their pupils.

1. Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on the Organization of Primary Education in the Czech Republic

The closure of schools had a significant impact on the organization of education which moved to the home environment in the form of the so-called distance education. This offered a range of organizational forms (for example online, offline, synchronous, asynchronous, etc.) However, all of these forms required special conditions that had to be ensured by the family. Every pupil was dependent on the technical equipment of the household. The crucial instruments required for pupils' active involvement in online education were mobile phones, laptops, computers, webcams, printers and high-quality internet connection. A strong emphasis was on children's autonomy, which would otherwise be obtained gradually. The individualized approach was limited due to teachers' lack of opportunities for observing their pupils (Kment, 2020).

A research study conducted in spring 2020 suggested that during the first months of distance education, a total of 5.8% of households with school-aged children did not have the necessary technology to participate in online learning (Federičová, Korbel, 2020). An analysis of the Czech School Inspectorate (2021) reported 15% of primary school pupils without digital technology. In March 2020, around 250,000 learners were identified as not having access to online learning. Nevertheless, they performed their tasks and communicated with the school in a different way. In spring 2021, this figure decreased to a fifth. However, during the whole period of school closure, there were cases of families not communicating with the school despite having been offered various methods and alternatives.

2. Limitations of Distance Education and Guidelines of the Ministry of Education, Youth And Sports of the Czech Republic

The reason for school closure was clear – protecting the population in the entire country. However, nobody was prepared for this in advance. This applied to both teachers and laws that did not include the term distance education in the system of primary schools. The guidelines of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports of the Czech Republic were developed “on the fly”.

The implementation of distance education pointed to a number of issues including organizational and technical aspects. According to Andrys (2020), the general organizational problems included particularly the overall restriction on all activities that teachers had prepared for full-time education but were unable to use due to the transition to distance education, including for example physical activity. This was also related to the limited opportunities for keeping children's attention. There was also a lack of clarity and demonstration. Teachers had to rely just on pictures and videos. Another negative consequence was the impossibility of direct interaction between pupils which is desirable and required in many subjects including group work. Problems were also in subject-related aspects, including for example conversation in a foreign language which was often limited by poor internet connection and it was impossible for the teacher to check correct pronunciation. In natural history, national history and basic humanities and natural science, teachers encountered a low level of pupils' motivation.

On the basis of a number of research studies, the following practical recommendations were formulated (MEYS, 2020, selected items):

- Fixed distance education timetable;
- Reduced learning content;
- Cooperation between arts and humanities teachers with the class teacher;
- Regular feedback from parents and pupils.

The above reflected primarily the organization of distance education. However, little attention was paid to the reflection of the process – not just the content. Our research study focused on the **processes of educational communication and their effects on the didactic structure:**

1. Designing distance education;
2. **Learning conditions in distance education;**
3. Learning supported by the teacher in distance education;
4. Provision of feedback in distance education;
5. Reflection of distance education.

The paper focuses only on a part of the research – analysis of the learning conditions in the context of distance education and their effect on the social classroom climate.

3. Research on Teacher Communication in Distance Education in Primary Schools in the Czech Republic

Educational communication is considered to be an important precondition for the implementation of the educational process. It is not only about transmission of information but primarily about developing a stimulating classroom climate and promoting the relationship with pupils.

Our intention was to identify **how educational communication was used in distance education, what opportunities it offered and what processes it blocked.** Subsequently, we analysed **the impact of these processes on the social classroom climate.** We focused on what aspects teachers should be prepared for, what they should expect or what strategies should be sought to eliminate the risks associated with the implementation of distance education. This form of education could become a standard under certain circumstances (for example for the purposes of educating learners with long-term illness).

The research was conducted by means of in-depth interviews (Hendl, 2008, Švaříček, Šed'ová, 2007) with four primary school teachers with more than 10 years of experience. The data was

subsequently processed according to a qualitative analysis methodology (Juklová, In Skutil et al., 2011). The methodology was structured as follows: commented transcription, segmentation, coding and categorization. In the classes of these teachers (grade 2, 3 and 4 of primary school) we used the standardized instrument My Class Inventory. The classes included a total of 137 pupils. The data were collected during the period of distance education and in the following period of full-time education. The data were then compared, quantitatively processed and presented using descriptive statistics.

Below are the results of the research study that model the process of educational communication during distance education in primary schools.

1. Specific Forms of Educational Communication During Distance Education

Promotion of education by means of verbal communication – distance education is dominated by this form over the other two. Nevertheless, there are some limitations. They include for example sound quality, poorly observable articulation and especially insufficient space for interactive feedback during a conversation.

This may impair the adequacy, clarity, unambiguity, material as well as language correctness or accuracy of the communication.

Promotion of education by means of non-verbal communication – in distance education the number of non-verbal expressions is limited – for example mimics, eye language or gestures. Some expressions are even impossible – haptics, proxemics, kinesics. This has a significant impact on the development of pupils' affective component.

The fact that some elements of non-verbal communication cannot be used at all or to a limited extent may result in insufficient interpretation on the part of the teacher concerning the adequacy of the learning content and its form as well as interest and concentration of pupils. On the side of the teacher, a great disadvantage is the absence of haptic expressions that can be used as a praise by patting, fist bump, stroking, etc.

Promotion of education by means of act – communication through act in distance education often replaced non-verbal communication. An example could be a virtual nudge to catch a pupil's attention.

2. Functional Elements of Educational Communication and Its Application in Distance Education

Asking questions – this was simplified during distance education as people believed in was a temporary period. Questions in non-personal meetings were not as extensive as in personal meetings.

Compliance with communication rules – teachers agreed that distance education was generally less organized or structured. Communication rules were frequently violated – for example when pupils did not wait for an instruction to respond, more pupils answered at the same time, or when reproached by the teacher they logged out or turned the teacher off. It was difficult to impose sanctions as it was difficult to proof the intention.

Humour – at the beginning of distance education, a more encouraging and supportive function was used because teachers thought it was a short-term issue. The first few weeks of school closure were in the spirit of a ‘corona holiday’ and humour was used by teachers to support pupils’ mental stability, helpfulness, self-criticism, etc. Humour was aimed at identifying unusual associations, was rich and revived communication. However, when the period of school closure was longer, teachers shifted their attention to the dampening and reducing function of humour and focused on mental instability, submissiveness, uncertainty, etc. As a result, humour played a role rather in conventional practices and stereotypical activities. All with a clear intention – to support pupils instead of deepening their uncertainty.

Pathological manifestations of communication – inappropriate pupils’ activities were often observed during distance education including changing the volume of sound (one’s own, teacher’s or classmates’), not respecting their responsibility to join educational activities, etc. Pathological manifestations of communication became even more serious as a result of distance education with pupils thinking that they were safe ‘at a distance’.

3. Interactivity and Social Aspects of Educational Communication During Distance Education

Direction of educational communication – distance education of primary school pupils was dominated by one-way communication from the teacher to the pupils but often the direction was from the pupil to the teacher. However, this mainly included a single question rather than a two-sided conversation. Multi-directional communication was completely absent.

Other aspects of educational communication – education aimed at the overall cultivation, socialization and personalization of pupils; in this process, educational communication is understood as a necessary functional element of implementation, which, in addition to providing an educational offer, allows the following:

- **Continuous monitoring of the pupil’s activity** – pupils can be monitored through the camera but not their activities (for example in workbooks),
- **Responding to educational situations** – this is a huge limitation as the situation in the online environment is quite confusing,
- **Supporting collaboration** – here, teachers tried to give assignments to groups who could work in an alternative virtual room, but younger pupils would often not return to the original teaching process and generally teachers did not have control over them. In the case of offline group work, part of the assignment often remained unaccomplished due to a lack of cooperation, etc.

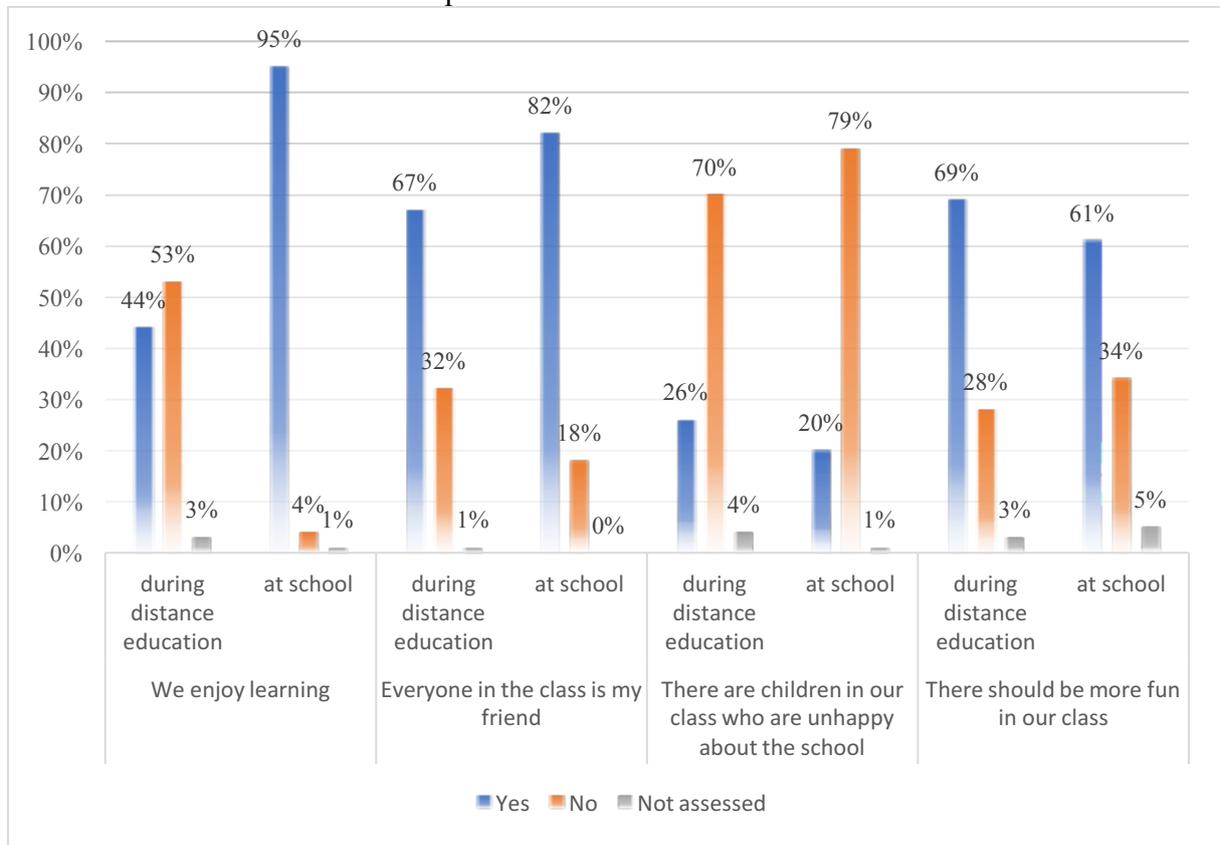
A deeper analysis of teacher communication in distance education is presented by Provázková Stolinská, Filípková (2021).

Then we analysed the impact of the quality of educational communication on the social classroom climate. Primary school pupils responded to identical areas in two different periods – at the time of blanket distance education in Czech primary schools and at the time of full-time education directly in schools.

First, we focused on how pupils felt in their class. Graph 1 presents several monitored variables that show that pupils feel better and more confident in the school environment. They enjoy learning much more compared with online education and enjoy their friendships much more. These results can be confronted with the conditions of educational communication which

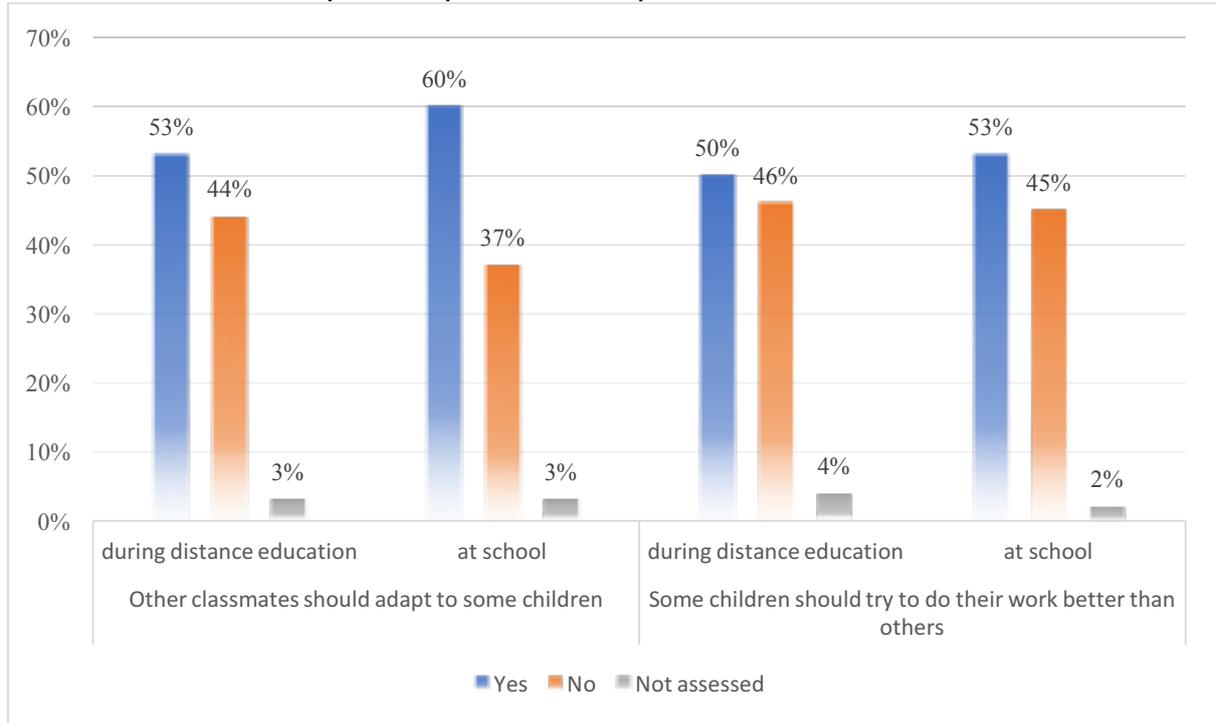
significantly limit these categories. What pupils would appreciate in both periods was more fun. This implies a lack of teachers' humour. However, it is important to consider the period of the research. Presumably, teachers focus on more conservative communication.

Graph 1: Satisfaction in the Class



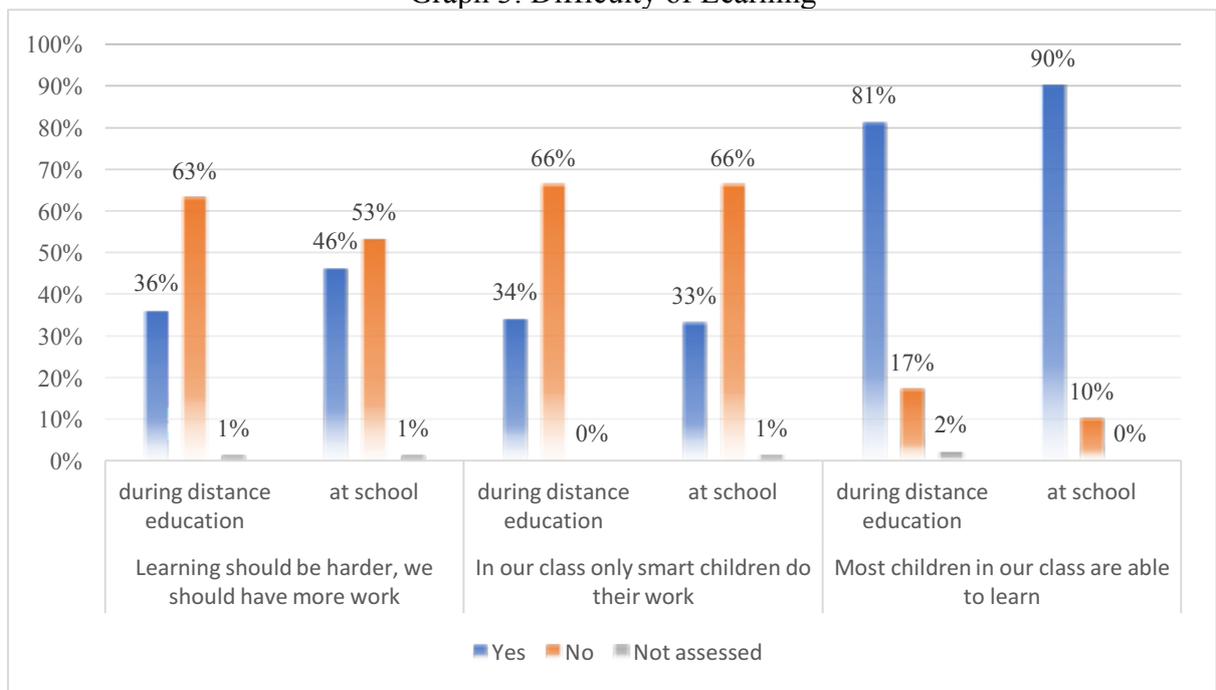
As far as the following two categories are concerned, they were not significantly affected by the pandemic. We focused on justice in education, which is a characteristic feature of young schoolchildren. We focused on the perception of the individual needs of classmates. Graph 2 suggests that in the school environment pupils are more aware of the need for individualization for some classmates. However, this manifestation is also evident in the distance environment.

Graph 2: Disputes and Competitiveness in the Class



In the difficulty of learning category there were no significant differences in pupils' opinions between the period of distance education and full-time education. Neither was there a significant difference in pupils' opinions about the difficulty of the teaching process. However, during the period of distance education negative responses slightly prevailed. Generally, however, pupils assessed themselves positively in the area of coping with teaching activities and demonstrated self-confidence.

Graph 3: Difficulty of Learning



Conclusion

The environment in which education takes place influences the nature of interaction and requires specific ways of communication. Distance education has transformed the conditions of education and significantly determined and limited the educational interaction characteristic of every class and teacher.

The term distance education itself suggests a number of barriers that restrict educational communication. Distance education disrupted interpersonal communication between teachers and pupils as well as between pupils. It significantly limited cooperation, clarity as well as practical application of the learning content.

Another disadvantage as suggested by teachers was the absence of direct communication with pupils including a number of non-verbal means to show agreement or encourage attention and activity. This is not to say that pupils should be afraid of punishment for inaction but it was impossible during distance education to observe the rules to an extent usual in personal meeting.

At the beginning, pupils were excited about learning a new way of using information technology and not having to go to school. Some even felt some kind of relief from their duties. However, after some period of time, they started to feel a lack of fulfilment and were frustrated as a result of the absence of social contact with classmates and teachers. Their lives lost clear leadership in learning and a regular school regimen. However, according to the results of the research, the basic level of the social classroom climate has not been significantly disturbed from a long-term perspective. After their return to school, pupils became stabilized again.

The reason for choosing distance education is clear – anything is better than nothing. One of the benefits is filling the gaps. However, it is important to understand that primary education requires personal contact and distance education can only be recommended for a short period of time. Without personal contact, educational objectives are achieved only partially and there is a lack of especially affective objectives which are crucial to the development of pupils' key competences.

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