

Analysis of a Narrative Reality: Testimonials of Children About School During The Pandemic

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Анализ на една наративна реалност: Отзиви на деца за училището по време на пандемията

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Нямаме известен конфликт на интереси, който да разкрием.

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Abstract

This article explores the advantages and risks of online schooling through a rapid overview of existing research and an empirical study conducted with students from a Bucharest secondary school. International data reveal that while online education ensured learning continuity during the pandemic, it also generated multiple challenges. Reported negative effects include cognitive issues (reduced attention and memory), socio-emotional difficulties (isolation, anxiety, cyberbullying, Internet addiction), and physical problems (sedentary behaviour, obesity, eye strain, headaches). Educational disparities, limited access to technology, and the need for parental assistance further deepened inequalities. Children with special educational needs were particularly affected by the suspension of support services during confinement periods. A key conclusion of the literature review is the limited representation of children's perspectives, as most studies rely on adults' views or restrictive survey instruments. To address this gap, a qualitative study conducted in March 2025 gathered the opinions of 53 students (grades 5–7) regarding the perceived effects of online schooling. Findings confirm many of the global concerns – declines in physical health, emotional well-being, and learning motivation – while also highlighting children's resilience, adaptability, and creative engagement with digital tools. The study emphasizes the importance of including children's voices in educational research and policymaking and calls for measures that balance protection from online risks with opportunities for digital participation and development.

Keywords: children, school, digital, education, COVID-19 pandemic

Резюме

Тази статия изследва предимствата и рисковете от онлайн обучението чрез бърз преглед на съществуващите изследвания и емпирично проучване, проведено с ученици от средно училище в Букурещ. Посочените международни данни показват, че макар онлайн образованието да осигурява непрекъснатост на обучението по време на пандемията, то също така генерира множество предизвикателства. Съобщените отрицателни ефекти включват когнитивни проблеми (намалено внимание и памет), социално-емоционални трудности (изолация, тревожност, кибертормоз, интернет пристрастяване) и физически проблеми (заседнало поведение, затлъстяване, напрежение в очите, главоболие). Образователните неравенства, ограниченият достъп до технологии и необходимостта от родителска помощ допълнително задълбочиха неравенствата. Децата със специални образователни потребности бяха особено

засегнати от спирането на услугите за подкрепа по време на периоди на изолация. Ключов извод от прегледа на литературата е ограниченото представяне на детските гледни точки, тъй като повечето проучвания разчитат на мненията на възрастни или на рестриктивни инструменти за анкетиране. За да се преодолее тази празнина едно качествено проучване, проведено през март 2025 г., събра мненията на 53 ученици (5-7 клас) относно възприеманите ефекти от онлайн обучението. Констатациите потвърждават много от глобалните проблеми - влошаване на физическото здраве, емоционалното благополучие и мотивацията за учене - като същевременно подчертават устойчивостта, адаптивността и творческото ангажиране на децата с дигитални инструменти. Проучването подчертава важноста на включването на детските гласове в образователните изследвания и разработването на политики и призовава за мерки, които балансират защитата от онлайн рискове с възможностите за дигитално участие и развитие.

Ключови думи: деца, училище, дигитално образование, пандемия COVID-19

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Introduction

The year 2020, marked by the evolution of the COVID-19 pandemic worldwide, represents a turning point for educational systems in all countries, most of which were forced to immediately integrate “online education” at all levels of schooling for periods that could be longer or shorter. The term “online education” or “online school” is used to define all educational solutions based on the use of Internet and digital technologies, implemented to continue learning in the context of restrictions imposed by the need to protect the population, including children, from infection with the SARS-CoV-2 virus: synchronous learning (via real-time connection applications/programs for students with the teacher, such as Zoom, Webex, etc.), or asynchronous (transmitting information via various messaging applications such as email, WhatsApp, etc.). To practice online schooling, at least two conditions must be met: access to devices (computer, laptop, tablet, and phone) connected to a quality Internet network and the existence of digital skills among teachers, students, and parents. The younger the children, the more they need to be helped by their parents to attend online school, which is not always easy, given that most companies have implemented “telework” for the same purpose, ensuring social distancing and population protection.

Globally, from March to April 2020, in more than 160 countries, school moved online, affecting 84% of students worldwide (UNESCO, 2021). In Europe, the vast majority of educational systems decided to close schools from March to April 2020 (Motiejūnaitė-Schulmeister & Crosier, 2020) while about 40% of workers were forced to work from home due to the pandemic (Vasiliou & Crosier, 2020; Eurofound, 2020)). The situation continued, schools often remaining closed until the end of the school year, and, at the autumn (2020-2021) start of the school year, online schooling situations reappeared, together with a growing number of infections in various sectors. For example, in Romania, students in the capital and several other departments did not physically attend school for more than 3 months out of the total 9 months of the school year. Given the disruptive and novel nature of this situation, many researchers around the world studied the phenomenon, trying to monitor its effects, identify the advantages and disadvantages of online teaching, given that in 2019, 98% of European Union households with children had Internet access, and 94% of children over 16 used technology daily (Eurostat, 2020). Given the high degree of Internet penetration in daily

life, the digitization of education was necessary and predictable, but no one could have imagined that school would move completely online in such a sudden and rapid way.

This article presents the advantages and risks associated with online schooling based on data from existing research on this topic, through a “rapid overview” of the literature. The main approach is to identify the characteristics of the phenomenon in various countries around the world, as well as the main concerns of parents and teachers related to excessive Internet use, with negative effects on both cognitive and socio-emotional levels (decreased attention and memory, lack of direct interaction with elderly people, cyberbullying and Internet addiction) and on the physical level, children’s health being threatened due to sedentary behaviour and the effects of prolonged screen exposure (obesity, headaches, eye problems). Subsequently, the article will analyze the narratives of students from a Bucharest school, regarding how they were affected by the shift of the school to an online environment and the positive and negative consequences they subsequently perceived.

Rapid overview of the literature

The unprecedented situation of a global pandemic has sparked great interest among social life researchers to identify the effects of protection measures taken against the disease, and recently many articles on this topic have appeared in scientific journals. To draw relevant conclusions about the consequences highlighted from already collected data, we conducted a rapid literature review. This method, a “rapid overview,” is an alternative to the systematic literature analysis method, made faster by using procedures such as: narrowing the research scope by minimizing the number of research questions and targeting specific issues; reducing search sources, limiting databases to those specialized ones; explicitly specifying a particular language in which it is published, or a short time window (Haby et al., 2016).

We therefore consider a rapid literature overview to be a useful method for researching the effects of the pandemic, given that the articles on this subject are relatively recent (2020–2021) and the types of measures introduced by governments worldwide (distancing, telework, online schooling, mandatory mask-wearing, etc.) are relatively the same.

In order to highlight the consequences of online schooling for the younger generation, a rapid systematic review of the literature was carried out following the adapted PRISMA (Moher et al., 2009) methodological principles and inclusion criteria for studies: appearing in 2020–2021 in scientific journals, open access, including both systematic analyses and individual studies with parents, teachers, or children/adolescents, on topics related to the pandemic’s

effects on children, published in English or Romanian. The Google Scholar database and sites of certain research institutes were searched with keywords: “effects of online schooling covid19/pandemic,” “negative/downsides of online schooling Covid-19/pandemic,” “benefits of online schooling Covid-19/pandemic.” Following selection based on title analysis, then abstract analysis, and after eliminating biases, 13 articles were retained for analysis, listed in Table 1.

Table 1

Results of the rapid systematic review of the specialized literature

No	Authors	Methodology	Year / Country	Identified problems				
				Childr en age	Physique	Psycho - social	Educational	Others
1	Cachón-Zagalaz et al. (2020)	Rapid systematic overview	2020	0 - 12 years	Sedentary lifestyle.	Exposure to too much information, stress, guilt, fear of getting sick.	Loss of rapid feedback, direct, with teachers.	Issues of children with SEND (special educational needs) (autism, etc.) who fell ill or lost loved ones due to the COVID-19 virus.
2	Panda et.al. (2020)	Rapid systematic overview	2020		Sleep problems, boredom.	Anxiety, depression, irritability, lack of attention, fear of COVID.		Children with SEND are more affected.

3	Xinyun et al. (2021)	Online questionnaire / 1035 educators	2020/Hong-Kong	2 - 6 years			Lack of digitization.	In general, there is a lack of digitization at the preschool level; the role of parents is very important.	
4	Tang et al. (2021)	Online questionnaire /	2020 / China	6 - 15 years			Anxiety, depression, stress.		
5	Lopez-Bueno et al. (2020)	Online questionnaire / 516 parents	2020/ Spain	3 - 16 years	Reduced physical activity, sleep problems, poor diet in fruits and vegetables, prolonged screen time.			The role of parent - child discussions is very important; parents can influence their children's behaviour for better or worse.	
6	Zhongren et al. (2021)	Online questionnaire / 668 parents	2021 / China	7 - 15 years			PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) and depression.	There are no educational losses; knowledge can be transmitted online.	Disparities by region and socioeconomic development.

7	Medrano et al. (2021)	Online questionnaire and medical measures / 113 children (MUNGI)	2020 / Spain	10 - 15 years	Sedentary lifestyle and low physical activity + prolonged screen exposure and increased sleep time; relatively healthy diet.		Disadvantaged children.
8	Utkarsh Bansal et al. (2020)	Online questionnaire / 2694 parents	2020 / India		Headaches, eye problems, lack of physical activity, weight gain, sleep problems, loss of appetite.	Stress, reduced attention, irritability, behaviour problems, lack of interaction with peers.	Family financial needs are increasing.
9	Şenay Kylyncel et al. (2020)	Online questionnaire / 745 children 12-18 years	2020/Turkey	12 - 18 years		Anxiety, loneliness, depression in people in quarantine / whose family is ill.	Exposure to excessive information and media.

10	Warlenda et al. (2021)	Online questionnaire / 120 parents	2020/Indonesia				Difficulties in understanding the topic, capturing interest.	The cost of Internet, parents' limited time to attend to children.
11	Rajabi (2020)	Online questionnaire / 10 000 parents	2020 / United Kingdom, Ireland,	4 - 18 years		Primary school children emotional, behavioural, and attention problems.	Psychological and educational support is necessary for children during the pandemic.	21% of children with SEND (SEN) (ADHD or others) were disadvantaged by stopping support services.
12	Vuorikari et al. (2020)	Online questionnaire: 5466 children 10-18 years and 6192 parents	2020/11 EU countries	10-18 years		Parents seek psychological support.	Fear of being left behind, of poor grades, of not understanding information; overload of assignments.	
13	Coller & Webber (2020)	Online questionnaire / 1011 parents	2020 / United States	Less than 18 years	Deterioration of physical condition and healthy behaviours.	Worsening mental state: stress, depression, fear, anger, boredom.		Single-parent families with very young, disadvantaged children are the most affected.

Analysis of the selected articles reveals strong heterogeneity in terms of the effects of online schooling on children. Researchers are interested either in potential physical or mental health effects or changes in education, but less often in children's overall well-being. By contrast, results obtained via online methods are homogeneous in the sense that attention is drawn to the gaps that widen between children, according to family characteristics, with several researchers considering that parents play a major role in mediating the effects of the pandemic and online education on children.

In short, the main risks that can affect children are: physical and physiological impairments due to sedentary behaviour, the worsening of eating and sleep habits, but also wasting too much time in front of screens; mental health issues due to stress, fear of the illness, loss of direct contact with peers, teachers, anxiety, depression, boredom – hence parents seek support and guidance from specialists; decline in educational levels due to difficulties generated by online schooling: lack of Internet access/devices, difficulties in understanding and solving tasks, sustaining attention and interest, the need for young children to be supported by their parents.

An important aspect of online schooling is the policies and support measures for families and children with special educational needs, affected by various physical and mental illnesses before the pandemic, especially during confinement periods when these policies and measures cease to function.

Another conclusion of this rapid systematic analysis is that the child's perspective is often not sought; most studies identify it in terms of adults' perceptions – parents or teachers. Moreover, even when the research subjects are children, the online questionnaire method limits their responses to pre-defined options created by adult researchers.

Under these conditions, the need to collect qualitative data from children, the main stakeholders in school closures and their relocation to online environments, becomes evident. This is all the more important now that children's voices are increasingly heard, particularly in the online environment, where they are often social actors in their own right, using and expressing themselves in the virtual space just like adults. In our view, research in which children and adolescents have the opportunity to freely express their opinions becomes extremely important at this moment.

To continue, we will present the results of an empirical and qualitative study, conducted creatively online with students from a Bucharest secondary school. The study examined children's perceptions of the positive and negative effects of online schooling.

Empirical research

For Bucharest students, the school started in person in September 2020, but was then closed from October to May 2021. Most students studied online, except for primary and graduating classes (the 5th and 8th grades, and the 12th grade in some cases) who were sometimes physically called to school for limited periods. Under these conditions, where the resumption of physical classes remained uncertain, a small-scale study was conducted in March 2025 with students from 5th to 7th grade at a Bucharest school, to identify the positive and negative effects they perceived.

The research method was an online form, with closed and open questions sent to students whose parents gave consent for them to participate. Fifty-three responses were collected, half of the children being in 5th grade and a quarter in 6th and 7th grades.

The aim of the research was to identify children's perceptions of the effects of online schooling over a long period (6 months), perceived at the physical, mental, and educational levels. The online form, created in Google Forms, included closed and open questions so that each child could freely express their view, in addition to the response given to the closed questions. Thus, both quantitative data (see Tables 2 – 5) and qualitative data were collected, with children expressing themselves freely.

Table 2

Activities missing to children due to the pandemic

What did you miss the most during this year of the pandemic (choose up to 3 options)	
Encounters with colleagues at school	83%
Getting out into nature	53%
Going out with friends or family	47%
Travel, camps	43%
Interaction with teachers	34%
Extracurricular sports activities	21%
Extracurricular educational activities	11%

Table 3*The new activities that children did during the pandemic*

What useful and enjoyable activities did you replace the previous ones with (choose up to 3 options)	
I played online games with colleagues	62%
I spent more time on the Internet	40%
Online meetings with friends	38%
I watched more movies	34%
I drew more	26%
I started helping more with household chores	19%
Family walks	19%
I read more	15%
Games with family members	13%
I learned to cook	13%
Exercise at home	9%
I learned new things thanks to online courses	9%

Table 4*Activities done on the Internet by children*

If you spent more time on the Internet (outside online classes), what did you do most often (choose up to 3 options):	
I talked to colleagues via messages	72%
I played online games	62%
I listened to music	60%
I watched YouTube	51%
I stayed on social networks	20%
I learned digital graphics	11%
I learned to make websites	6%

Table 5*Health problems perceived by children*

Did you experience, due to isolation restrictions and extended time spent online, (choose up to 3 options):	
Headaches	55%
Back problems	45%
Vision problems	43%
Nervousness, stress	36%
Sleep problems	30%
Difficulty concentrating/attention	22%
Decrease in muscle mass due to lack of exercise	9%
Excessive sadness	9%
Eating disorder	8%

The quantitative data collected are useful for capturing the positive and negative aspects of online schooling for 11 to 14-year-old children. The results highlight that gaps in social interaction with peers and teachers were generally replaced by online activities. By default, there was an increase in time spent online by children, with negative physical effects (headaches, eye problems, spine/back issues) and mental effects, children experiencing sleep problems, nervousness, irritability, sadness, but also concentration difficulties.

Each closed question was complemented by open-ended questions, to which each respondent could add “something else”, leading to the collection of free responses from more than half of the responding students. Thus, regarding what they missed most during the pandemic, students mentioned: “the freedom to go out, to do different things”, “nature outings with family and friends”, “games and meetings with peers at school”, “everything”. About their favourite hobbies, the free responses revealed that children often refined their leisure activities - “I sang”, “I drew”, “reading”, “I started to learn to solve more Rubik’s cubes”, “I began to learn various new things from the Internet”, “I did more hobbies” - proving that even young children can use digital technology in a useful way. The same conclusion emerges from the free responses about online activities, in addition to those listed - games, music, communication - children said they were “on social networks where I found many friends who stayed with me while we were all in quarantine”, they “talked to peers and friends via

messages”, and they “used Netflix, YouTube and other online platforms”. Regarding the problems they faced during the quarantine period, children admitted they “felt lonely”, had “nervousness, muscle and back pain”, “growing nerve issues and I started to be very sad and distracted”, and “because I had to stay online a lot, I started to have anger problems, or to become very sad. I also had trouble focusing, which does not help at all with online school”.

When asked generically what they think about online school, the children again show awareness of both positive and negative aspects: “I prefer going to school because I miss the contact with teachers and classmates. I liked seeing my teachers and feeling them, going to the blackboard. I often have problems with Internet, I feel stressed. I want the pandemic to end”; “Because before we could go out and play together”; “I preferred when I went to school physically because it was different ... socializing with each other was more fun during breaks and I can say that we had even more physical activity, which is important in our lives”; “I have many reasons but one of the most important is that we are not as happy as before; before we could play, but now we Zoom and it’s not as fun to Zoom, especially with eyes glued to the screen more than 4 hours per day”; “I don’t understand anything online!”; “School continues, even online, because classes are still taught”; “It’s awful online or hybrid! Students are disoriented and we don’t understand anything, it cannot be called school anymore, we don’t learn properly! We are given high grades, but they don’t necessarily reflect our knowledge, then the tests on the platform... it’s easy to cheat, we’re no longer motivated to learn”.

Conclusion

Given that a one in three internet user worldwide is a child, although the Internet was not created for them, their exposure to several dangers related to the online environment has also been observed. Currently, discussions on the rights of the child in the online environment have intensified, considering that they must be at least similar to those offline (Council of Europe, 2020). In March 2021, the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child emphasized this issue in document 25/2021 (United Nations, 2021), recommending that Member States take measures to protect the best interests of children in the virtual world, also taking into account the views of children. In this regard, broader research is encouraged to deepen the understanding of how children’s development is influenced by the integration of technology into all aspects of their lives.

Over the last year and a half, data collected by researchers worldwide through quantitative methods, mainly via online questionnaires, demonstrate the disruptive nature of the pandemic and the numerous negative effects that restricting face-to-face activities has had on everyone, particularly on children, by moving educational activities to the online environment. When quantitative data are complemented by qualitative data, it is possible to deepen the issue to a level where the numerous interpenetrations and ramifications of the problem can be highlighted.

Thus, by combining information obtained using the rapid overview method with the data obtained from empirical research, we found a set of negative consequences that are physical and mental, socio-emotional, but also educational for children. Regarded as a traumatic event, the pandemic and long-term online schooling (as in the case of Bucharest students) can adversely affect the development of children and adolescents, even though the measures taken have the advantage of protecting children and their families from the pandemic's effects, which children themselves acknowledge. Research and children's accounts reveal potential adverse effects: on physical development – vision problems, posture and spine issues, reduced muscle mass, headaches, and a number of problems associated with a sedentary lifestyle and lack of outdoor activities, such as eating and sleep disturbances; on mental and socio-emotional development – stress, anxiety, depression, reduced attention and motivation, exposure to Internet dangers such as cyberbullying, encounters with strangers, excessive exposure to inappropriate information, isolation and loneliness. These are in addition to pedagogical losses, the ineffectiveness of online teaching, even under conditions of ensuring online connectivity in sync with teachers. For younger children, parental support is necessary, which is not always possible, and assessment methods are limited, with students often finding innovative ways to copy and cheat. All of this becomes more serious when the family is in a vulnerable situation, whether socio-economic or medical, including the reduction or even cessation of institutional support (hot meals, specialized therapy, and individualized education for children with disabilities).

At the same time, empirical research conducted with children from a Bucharest school demonstrates, in line with data obtained in other studies (Livigstone, Pothong & Baroness Beeban, 2021), that seeking children's opinions is very valuable for understanding the impact of access to the virtual space on their lives, since they are aware of both positive and negative aspects.

The pandemic period is a major turning point in everyone's life, especially the lives of children, facilitating access to opportunities to play and learn in the virtual environment. Children often demonstrate innovative skills and resilience in adapting and using online resources. The current orientation of online child protection promotes the idea of focusing public policies not so much on what parents and other important adults could do in children's lives, but rather on manufacturers and actors in the domain, to build a safe Internet for children (CRC). From the results obtained, we consider it important to take into account all threats related to children's use of the Internet (physical, mental, and educational) in the list of factors that should guide the harmonious development and well-being of children in the digital era.

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