

SCHOOLTEACHERS-PARENTS INTERACTIONS AMID DISTANCE AND BLENDED LEARNING: TWO- YEAR EXPERIENCE OF OVERCOMING NEGATIVE INFLUENCES OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Oleksandr Malykhin

Institute of Pedagogy of the National Academy of Educational Sciences of Ukraine, Ukraine

Nataliia Aristova

Institute of Pedagogy of the National Academy of Educational Sciences of Ukraine, Ukraine

Liudmyla Kalinina

Institute of Pedagogy of the National Academy of Educational Sciences of Ukraine, Ukraine

Abstract. *The paper aims to show the shifts within the paradigm of schoolteachers-parents interactions amid distance and blended learning. The authors examine two-year experience of overcoming negative influence of the Covid-19 pandemic onto the system of general secondary school education. Two web-based questionnaires (for schoolteachers and for parents) were developed using Google Forms. The main objective is to get information from schoolteachers, on the one hand, and from parents, on the other hand, as for challenges they faced amid blended learning caused by the influence of the Covid-19 pandemic on the system of general secondary school education. The research methodology targeted at summarising theoretical issues on the topic and collecting empirical data comprises both the theoretical method of analysis and synthesis and the empirical method of web-based surveys. The research sample includes 2269 respondents (619 general secondary schoolteachers and 1650 parents) from different regions of Ukraine. As a general conclusion the researchers identified and substantiated the system of psychological and didactic tasks that are to be solved for harmonising further schoolteachers-parents interactions amid distance and blended learning caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. Moreover, the researchers do believe that the existing theoretical and methodological foundations of organising and providing the educational process at the stage of general secondary education are to be radically reviewed.*

Keywords: *blended learning, Covid-19 pandemic, distance learning, general secondary school, schoolteachers-parents interactions, system of psychological and didactic tasks.*

Introduction

The idea that family is a vital tool to affect schoolchildren's attitudes to education in general and to school in particular finds support in various studies aimed at finding out the role of a family on child education (Czerepaniak-Walczak, 2020; Safitri et al., 2019; Setyastuti et al., 2021). After the outbreak of Covid-19 in most countries of the world it was the parents who assumed teachers' responsibilities while their children were denied access to traditional

schooling. In this connection, reference can be drawn from the study carried out by a team of researchers who acknowledged that after school closures caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, parents “suddenly have the role of “home teachers” to help their children learn and understand the lessons” (Setyastuti et al., 2021). Unprecedented and unexpected shift to distance learning as one of the forced measures to protect schoolchildren against coronavirus showed that despite large-scale introduction of digital technologies into education over the past decades a significant number of schoolteachers lacked the necessary digital skills and were not ready to deliver instruction to schoolchildren remotely during the first weeks and even months of school closures let alone parents. Another significant problem for delivering quality distance education was that many schoolchildren, especially in low-income and middle-income families, lacked access to high-speed Internet, computers, smartphones etc. A review of the literature indicates that such a situation arose in many different countries (Agostinelli et al., 2022; Tadesse & Muluye, 2020; UNICEF, 2020a; UNICEF, 2020b) and Ukraine is not an exception. It also turned out that in such a desperate state parental involvement became a determining factor “for the success of the online education environment” (Czerepaniak-Walczak, 2020).

Like in many European countries social distancing measures including school closures were introduced in March 2020 in Ukraine. From then on Ukraine was divided into four areas of epidemiological safety, namely: red, orange, yellow and green. And since the division of Ukraine into such areas, all general secondary schools have been implementing either distance or blended learning depending on the area they are in (Ministry of Health of Ukraine, 2020). Caught in a situation which the mind could barely anticipate both schoolteachers and parents had to seek all the possible ways to create effective interactions to deliver quality distance education to schoolchildren. Thus, the main aim of this paper is to show the shifts within the paradigm of schoolteachers-parents interactions amid distance and blended learning considering the two-year experience of overcoming negative influence of the Covid-19 pandemic onto the system of general secondary school education.

Methodology

The research methodology targeted at summarising theoretical issues on the topic and collecting empirical data comprises both the theoretical method of analysis and synthesis and the empirical method of web-based surveys.

Conducting web-based surveys among Ukrainian general secondary schoolteachers and parents within the project “Organisation of Educational Process in the Content of Unpredicted Changes (the Covid-19 Pandemic): Comparative Analysis (Ukraine – EU countries)”, we found out that among major problems schoolteachers faced during the first weeks of school closures because of the outbreak of coronavirus in Ukraine were the following ones: the

lack of face-to-face interaction with parents; scarce opportunities for providing consistent feedback to parents and as a result misunderstanding and even conflict situations; parental dissatisfaction with the number of assignments allotted to their child/children and unwillingness of marginalised parents to take responsibilities for education of their child/children etc. (Topuzov, Malykhin, & Aristova, 2021). The results obtained got us thinking about the changes that had been taking place in the system of general secondary education and the acute need for showing shifts within the paradigm of schoolteachers-parents interactions amid distance and blended learning caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Due to restrictions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic the research was carried out remotely using two web-based questionnaires (for schoolteachers and for parents) developed by the team of researchers using Google Forms. The ideas expressed in the scientific works by Topuzov (2021) and Topuzov, Malykhin, & Opaliuk (2018) became the theoretical basis for developing web-based questionnaires. The web-based questionnaires were targeted at obtaining information from both schoolteachers and parents as for challenges they faced amid blended learning caused by the influence of the Covid-19 pandemic on the system of general secondary school education. In order to gain comprehensive insight into the shifts within the paradigm of schoolteachers-parents interactions amid distance and blended learning considering the two-year experience of overcoming negative influence of the Covid-19 pandemic onto the system of general secondary school education, the web-based questionnaires for both general secondary schoolteachers and parents contained the same open-ended questions:

1. *Can you list the problems schoolchildren faced immediately after the transition of traditional classroom teaching and learning to the distance and/blended ones caused by the Covid-19 pandemic?*
2. *What way did you do to keep in touch with a teacher/parents and who initiated the communication after the sudden shift to distance learning caused by the Covid-19 pandemic?*
3. *Do you believe that parents' engagement in school affairs is crucial for providing schoolchildren with effective distance and blended learning amid the Covid-19 pandemic? Explain your point of view.*
4. *Do you believe that regular and well-organised two-way communication between teachers and parents helps improve academic performance of schoolchildren amid distance and blended learning caused by the Covid-19 pandemic? Explain your point of view.*
5. *What modes of communication were the most useful for improving teachers-parents interactions before the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic?*

6. *What modes of communication do you find the most useful for improving teachers-parents interactions amid distance and blended learning caused by the Covid-19 pandemic?*
7. *Have there been any positive developments regarding teachers-parents interactions amid distance and blended learning caused by the Covid-19 pandemic?*

The web-based survey lasted for three months and took place in September-November 2021. The links to the web-based questionnaires were sent to the principals and teachers of general secondary schools in different regions of Ukraine the team of researchers cooperates with. The mentioned principals and teachers of general secondary schools were asked to share the links among their colleagues and parents. This resulted in 2269 responses from 619 general secondary schoolteachers who teach different subjects and 1650 parents from different regions of Ukraine. The sociodemographic characteristics of general secondary schoolteachers are given in Table 1.

Table 1 Sociodemographic Characteristics of General Secondary Schoolteachers Participating in the Web-Based Survey

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Number (n=619)</i>	<i>Percentage (100%)</i>
<i>Gender</i>		
<i>Female</i>	576	93
<i>Male</i>	43	7
<i>Position</i>		
<i>School Principal</i>	12	2
<i>A Category-1 Teacher</i>	93	15
<i>A Category-2 Teacher</i>	93	15
<i>A Higher Category Teacher</i>	173	28
<i>A School Counselor</i>	149	24
<i>A Teacher</i>	99	16
<i>Working Experience</i>		
<i>More Than 20 Years</i>	285	46
<i>From 10 To 20 Years</i>	148	24
<i>From 3 To 10 Years</i>	136	22
<i>Up to 3 Years</i>	50	8
<i>School level</i>		
<i>Primary school</i>	327	53
<i>Middle school</i>	186	30
<i>High school</i>	106	17

*Source: own study
n=619*

The sociodemographic characteristics of parents participating in the web-based survey are presented in Table 2.

Table 2 Sociodemographic Characteristics of Parents Participating in the Web-Based Survey

Variable	Number (n=1650)	Percentage (100%)
Age		
≤30	33	2
31-35	381	23
36-40	528	32
41-45	462	28
46-50	132	8
51-55	48	3
≥56	66	4
Family composition		
Full family (a father and a mother)	1353	82
A single-parent family (a mother)	248	15
A single-parent family (a father)	49	3
Number of children		
One	627	38
Two	858	52
Three	149	9
Four	16	1
Number of school-age children		
One	1139	69
Two	478	29
Three	33	2

Source: own study
n=1650

Research results

Table 3 The List of Problems Schoolchildren Faced Immediately After the Transition of Traditional Classroom Teaching and Learning to the Distance and/or Blended Ones Caused by the Covid-19

Respondents (n=2269)	Categories							
	<i>Internet Problems</i>	<i>Lack of Proper Digital Skills</i>	<i>Poor Independent Study Skills</i>	<i>Study-related Stress</i>	<i>Lack of In-person Communication</i>	<i>Lack of Proper Computer Equipment</i>	<i>Poor Housing Conditions</i>	<i>Health-related Stress</i>
<i>General Secondary Schoolteachers (n=619)</i>	589	504	305	312	497	564	207	543
<i>Parents (n=1650)</i>	1573	1297	1112	890	1179	803	387	1206

Source: own study
n=2269

The obtained results regarding the list of problems schoolchildren faced immediately after the transition of traditional classroom teaching and learning to the distance and/or blended ones caused by the Covid-19 pandemic in general secondary schoolteachers' and parents' opinion are given in Table 3. It should be noted that analysing the replies to the first question we tried to single out the similar problems mentioned by both schoolteachers and parents.

According to the obtained results, both general secondary schoolteachers (95%) and parents (95%) indicated that immediately after the transition of traditional classroom teaching and learning to the distance and/or blended ones caused by the Covid-19 schoolchildren experienced various problems with the Internet. 81% of general secondary schoolteachers and 79% of parents pointed out that one of the serious problems the majority of schoolchildren faced after the first wave of school closures was the lack of proper digital skills to study remotely. 49% of general secondary schoolchildren and 67% of parents stated that schoolchildren had poor independent study skills (mostly this problem concerned primary school pupils). Such problem as "Study-related stress" was mentioned by 52% of general secondary schoolteachers and 54% of parents. Both general secondary schoolteachers (80%) and parents (71%) admitted that schoolchildren lacked in-person communication and missed their friends greatly. And although schoolchildren had the opportunity to communicate with their classmates and friends online via different messenger and/or chat apps they felt terribly frustrated. 91% of general secondary schoolteachers were convinced that the most serious problem which prevented schoolchildren from coping with the curriculum was the lack of proper computer equipment at home (for instance, *obsolete laptops or PCs, absence of printers etc.*). But despite the fact that the same problem was mentioned by 49% of parents, it should be noted that parents did not consider it very serious (or maybe failed to recognize it because of different reasons). Reviewing their past experience, 33% of general secondary schoolteachers noticed that some schoolchildren had no opportunity to reach their full potential because of poor housing conditions (for instance, *did not have their own desk, , tablet or laptop let alone room, had to share one desk with a sibling (siblings) etc.*). Parents' opinions were not so critical and categorical as such a problem was identified by 23% of them. And the last problem mentioned by both general secondary schoolteachers (88%) and parents (73%) concerned health-related stress (for instance, *blurred vision, neck pain, headaches, shoulder aches etc.*).

Also we would like to exemplify some replies to question 1 given by parents:

P 397: I have two children and one of them is a second-grade pupil. After the transition of traditional classroom learning to the distance one caused by the Covid-19 pandemic one of the serious problems my child faced was the poor independent study skills and digital skills to study remotely. And, to tell the truth, it was rather difficult to keep him motivated all the time. It was me who

constantly tried to motivate him and even to force him to listen to the teacher and to complete all the allotted tasks. The next problem was the lack of in-person communication with his peers, the thing which is very important at his age.

P 10: Although everyone was talking about possible lockdown it took us by surprise. I have a daughter who is an elementary schooler and a son who is a high school student. The main and the most serious problems my children faced were the lack of proper computer equipment to study remotely (I mean at the same time) and the poor housing conditions for providing instruction in the home. We found it very difficult to organise their learning in a proper way (especially at the same time). Well, then if we speak about my daughter, from what I can tell she had poor independent skills to study remotely, was not very attentive and she needed to be controlled all the time. Concerning my son, as he is a high school student, I do believe that his learning load was too excessive. Then, the tasks in many subjects were of increased complexity and sometimes he had no opportunity to cope with them without teachers' explanations. And, unfortunately, my knowledge was not enough to explain him the material he didn't understand

The second question was aimed at finding out what way parents and schoolteachers kept in touch and who initiated the communication after the sudden shift to distance learning caused by the Covid-19 pandemic in March 2020. 100% of general secondary school teachers replied that it was their duty not only to open communication with parents but to initiate it. All general secondary schoolteachers mentioned that after the introduction of lockdown due coronavirus all parents were immediately contacted. 87% of general secondary schoolteachers replied that during the first weeks of the first wave of school closures which happened in March 2020, both teachers and parents were confused but then step by step the process of communication was established on a regular basis and many parents started to show more interest in academic performance of their child/children. It should be mentioned that 27% of general secondary schoolteachers (mostly primary school teachers) pointed out that some parents were proactive and they initiated the communication (via different messenger apps) even before the sudden shift to distance learning caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.

The third question we were interested in was: "Do you believe that parents' engagement in school affairs is crucial for providing schoolchildren with effective distance and blended learning amid the Covid-19 pandemic? Explain your point of view". So, replying to this question nearly all general secondary schoolteachers (98%) mentioned that parents' engagement in school affairs became really crucial for providing schoolchildren with effective distance and blended learning amid the Covid-19 pandemic. Unlike schoolteachers, only 62% of parents thought that their engagement was crucial. We do believe that

indifference of parents became one of the main problems for providing schoolchildren with quality education.

The fourth question was targeted at clarifying if regular and well-organised two-way communication between teachers and parents helped improve academic performance of schoolchildren amid distance and blended learning caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. All the general secondary schoolteachers (100%) stated that regular and well-organised two-way communication could help schoolchildren cope with the curriculum successfully. And only 57% of parents admitted that they tried to contact teachers to learn more about their children's school results or about problems they faced. These parents noted that since teachers regularly sent all the necessary information regarding study-related changes caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, the only thing they had to do was to follow all the instructions. Such ideas expressed by 57% of parents prove the fact that every second parent demonstrated indifference and underestimate the importance of two-way communication between teachers and parents.

The main aim of the fifth and sixth questions was aimed at finding out the most useful modes of communication for improving teachers-parents interactions before the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and throughout the two-year experience of implementing distance and/or blended learning. Thus, both general secondary schoolteachers (93%) and parents (84%) noted that before the outbreak of coronavirus the most useful modes of communication were various in-person events (mostly face-to-face teachers-parents meetings and/or one-on-one meetings) which helped strengthen teachers-parents relationships. In their replies parents reported that they were able to come to the school and to discuss some troubling questions in person at the time of their convenience. It should be noted that about 63% of general secondary schoolteachers (mostly primary school teachers (51%)) explained that in addition to in-person events they communicated with parents using various messenger applications (for instance, *Viber, WhatsApp, Facetime* etc.). They also stated that these messenger apps did not enable them to have expansive conversations (for instance, *to discuss some study-related issues, to raise some questions or to address any doubts*) but to maintain regular communications (for instance, *information-sharing*) which was rather convenient. As for parents, we should point out that 34% of them stated that even before the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic they found it very difficult to attend face-to-face teachers-parents meetings on a regular basis and the opportunity to communicate via messenger apps was the best choice. And after the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic 67% of general secondary schoolteachers stated that they started to organise virtual teachers-parents meeting on a regular basis using some video-conferencing platforms (for instance, *Webex, Google Meet* etc.), phone-based conversations for parents who did not have access to the high-speed Internet or proper computer equipment as well as distributing study-related information via e-mail. However, acknowledging the fact that at the very beginning virtual

teachers-parents meetings were time-consuming and confusing, 67% of general secondary schoolteachers confirmed that with the passing of time and with parents' help and their willingness to support both their children and teachers such a mechanism for interaction was improved. It should be noted that in their replies to the sixth question 83% of parents reported that before the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic they underestimated the hard work of teachers and in most cases had taken everything for granted. After spending such a long period of time with their children at home and helping them coping with school curriculum, parents (83%) had to admit that the teachers-parents interactions played a very important role in establishing the best possible conditions for providing their children with quality distance and/or blended learning.

And the main aim of the seventh question was to find out if there had any positive developments regarding teachers-parents interactions amid distance and blended learning caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. The obtained results show that the transition to distance and/or blended learning was effective and rather painless for those general secondary schoolteachers (79%) who established well-organised interactions with parents prior to the outbreak the Covid-19 pandemic. And in most cases these were the primary and high school teachers. It also should be noted that for those general secondary schoolteachers who had to build communication with parents from the very beginning amid distance and/blended learning caused by the Covid-19 pandemic (21%) it took them more time and effort. Replying to this question, general secondary schoolteachers (79%) pointed out the format of communication between them and parents had changed (for instance, *the use of video-conferencing platforms, messenger applications and electronic mail etc.*) for better. 32% of general secondary schoolteachers reported that parents' willingness to support their children even helped parents enhance confidence between them. Parents (77%) stated that they welcomed the decision to use more technology for communicating with teachers.

So, the obtained results enable us to state that according to both general secondary schoolteachers and parents well-organised and systemic schoolteachers-parents interactions can create all the necessary conditions to provide children with continuous education in the home and not to lower its quality amid distance and/or blended learning caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Conclusions and Findings

In conclusion, the team of researchers identified and substantiated the system of psychological and didactic tasks that are to be solved for harmonising further schoolteachers-parents interactions amid distance and blended learning caused by the Covid-19 pandemic:

1. To establish different mechanisms (to devise various strategies) for regular teachers-parents interactions amid distance and/or blended learning caused by the Covid-19 pandemic taking into account preferable communication styles both for teachers and parents (virtual teachers-parents meetings via videoconferencing platforms, communication via e-mail and/or via messenger apps, face-to-face teachers-parents meetings etc.). It means that teachers-parents interactions cannot be limited to one communication strategy only. Moreover, for providing schoolchildren with more support at home, both school administration and general secondary schoolteachers should consider additional ways of communicating with parents who show less engagement in children's education.
2. To implement various "teachers-schoolchildren-parents", "teachers-parents", "parents-children" types of study-related and extracurricular activities throughout the school year to increase parents' motivation to get involved in their children's education.
3. To provide parents with information (by means of webinars, online workshops or video-lessons) on effective online teaching and learning methods considering schoolchildren's individual (age-related) differences.
4. To give parents opportunities to provide feedback related to effective or, in the alternative, ineffective approaches, methods and techniques to improve online instruction amid distance and/or blended learning caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.
5. To provide opportunities for parents to get to know about formative and summative assessment methods used in distance and/or blended learning caused by the Covid-19 pandemic and how to engage schoolchildren in self-assessment
6. To support the physical and emotional well-being of both teachers and parents during the Covid-19 pandemic (for instance, to organize online and/or face-to-face teachers-parents discussions on how to react to stressful events related to schoolchildren's reluctance to learn online or on how to cope with study-related changes caused by the Covid-19 pandemic etc.).

Moreover, the researchers do believe that the existing theoretical and methodological foundations for organising and providing the educational process at the stage of general secondary education are to be radically reviewed. Taking into account the fact that the spectrum of pressing issues concerning the delivery of subject-matter knowledge and lifelong skills at all levels of education, further research regarding teachers-parents interactions is needed to investigate parents' opinions, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, general secondary schoolteachers' opinions depending on school level.

References

- Agostinelli, F., Doepke, M., Sorrenti, G., & Zilibotti, F. (2022). When the great equalizer shuts down: Schools, peers, and parents in pandemic times. *Journal of Public Economics* 206 (2022), 104574. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpubeco.2021.104574>
- Czerepaniak-Walczak, M. (2020). Respect for the Right to Education in the COVID-19 Pandemic Time. Towards Reimagining Education and Reimagining Ways of Respecting the Right to Education. *The New Educational Review*, 62, 57-66. DOI: 10.15804/tner.2020.62.4.05
- Ministry of Health of Ukraine. (2020). Osvita ta batkivstvo [Education and Parenthood]. Retrieved from <https://covid19.gov.ua/osvita-ta-batkivstvo>
- Safitri, D., Hafni, R., Aisya, & Syifafasya, N. (2019). The Role of Family Communication in Child Education. In *Proceedings of the 3rd International Conference on Social and Political Development - ICOSOP 3*, 270-273. DOI: 10.5220/0010018002700273
- Setyastuti Y., Suminar J. R., Hadisiwi P., & Zubair F. (2021). Schooling from home: millennial moms family communication and media uses in COVID-19. *Jurnal Studi Komunikasi*, 5(3), 709-728. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25139/jsk.v5i3.3844>
- Tadesse, S., & Muluye, W. (2020). The Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Education System in Developing Countries: A Review. *Open Journal of Social Sciences*, 8, 159-170. <https://doi.org/10.4236/jss.2020.810011>
- Topuzov, O. (2021). Osvitnye partnerstvo v systemi zahalnoyi serednoyi osvity: teoriya i metodolohiya. Kyiv, Instytut pedahohiky, Pedahohichna dumka.
- Topuzov, O., Malykhin, O., & Opalyuk, T. (2018). Pedahohichna majsternist: rozvytok profesijno-pedahohichnoyi adaptivnosti socialnoyi refleksiyi majbutnoho vchytelya. Kyiv, Instytut pedahohiky, Pedahohichna dumka.
- Topuzov, O., Malykhin, O., & Aristova, N. (2021). System of psychological and didactic tasks players in the educational process face in the paradigm “teachers – schoolchildren – parents” amid the Covid-19 pandemic. *Education: Modern Education*, 4, 23-31.
- UNICEF. (2020a). Education and COVID-19. Retrieved from <https://data.unicef.org/topic/education/covid-19/>
- UNICEF. (2020b). COVID-19: Are children able to continue learning during school closures? Retrieved from <https://data.unicef.org/resources/remote-learning-reachability-factsheet/>