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Research, Internationalization and Training of Teachers in Pandemic Times – Microethnographic Studies

Badania, internacjonalizacja i kształcenie nauczycieli w czasach pandemii – mikroetnograficzne badania

Abstract: The need to reformulate teaching practices in the face of the methodological change related to COVID-19 forced educational researchers to shift the primary field of their research – the school and its actors – to a field still unknown to most, the virtual ground. The importance of listening to the subjects involved in the processes of learning of the teaching profession, with all the artefacts related to it – students, school space, principals, peers, families, and communities – forced the paradigm shift. Due to the pandemic, the ethnographic studies in education, rich in their interaction with the subjects, due to the pandemic, placed the researcher (participant observer) and the participant (subject involved and able to redirect the investigation) in a hybrid relationship in which physical presence began to be mediated and conditioned by the rules of the Ministries of Health of each country involved in the research. The physical presence of the researcher with the subjects, allows an understanding of their position in the space (classroom choreography) and their interaction/performance concerning the other (teacher, student, family, managers, community). This dynamic was altered by the impossibility of being present and by introducing the third interlocutor – a webcam used for online communications. Facing this challenge and bearing in mind the need to maintain the researcher's relationship with the participants of the study, we share the research narrative provided so far. The aim of this paper is to observe/understand the influence of the pandemic on teaching practices, using different lenses to explore the hybrid interconnections. There were used microethnographic strategies in order to find out the opinions of the subjects involved in the research.

Keywords: research; internationalisation; teacher training; microethnography

Abstrakt: Potrzeba przeformułowania praktyk nauczania w obliczu zmiany metodologii w efekcie pandemii COVID-19 zmusiła naukowców do przeniesienia ich podstawowego obszaru badań, czyli szkoły i jej aktorów, do dziedziny wciąż nieznanej większości – badań online. Znaczenie słuchania przedmiotów zaangażowanych w procesy uczenia się zawodu nauczyciela – ze wszystkimi artefaktami z nim związanymi: uczniami, przestrze-

nią szkolną, dyrektorami, rówieśnikami, rodzinami i społecznościami – wymusiło zmianę paradygmatu w badaniach. Badania etnograficzne w edukacji, bogate w interakcje z podmiotami, ze względu na pandemię umieściły badacza (uczestnika) i obserwowanego (podmiot zaangażowany i zdolny do przekierowania badania) w relacji hybrydowej, w której fizyczna obecność zaczęła być mediowana i uwarunkowana przepisami formułowanymi przez ministerstwa zdrowia każdego kraju zaangażowanego w badanie. Na terytorium każdego kraju badacze mają możliwość udania się na miejsce badania lub pozostania w domu. Fizyczna obecność badacza z badanymi pozwala zrozumieć ich pozycję w przestrzeni (choreografia w klasie) i ich interakcję/wydajność dotyczącą drugiego człowieka (nauczyciela, ucznia, rodziny, menedżerów, społeczności). Dynamika ta została zmieniona przez niemożność bycia obecnym i wejście na scenę tzw. trzeciego rozmówcy – kamery używanej do komunikacji online. W obliczu tego wyzwania i biorąc pod uwagę potrzebę utrzymania relacji badacza z przedmiotem badania, dzielimy się narracją uzyskaną w badaniach. Badania te miały na celu obserwację/zrozumienie wpływu pandemii na praktyki nauczania przy użyciu różnych metod w celu zbadania połączeń hybrydowych. Zastosowana metodologia ma charakter jakościowy. Autorzy wykorzystali w badaniach strategie mikroetnograficzne, aby uzyskać opinie osób badanych.

Słowa kluczowe: badania; umiędzynarodowienie; kształcenie nauczycieli; mikroetnografia

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, the acronym VUCA used by Bennis and Nanus (1985) "to describe or to reflect on the volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity of general [school] conditions and situations" (www1) is constantly changing and needs to be updated. Under pandemic conditions, we see that the complexity of these conditions forces us to find divergent paths, full of ambiguity, uncertainty, and volatility.

The internationalisation of education promoted by universities and other organizations related to training and learning has broadened the vision of teaching practices and forced the construction of new learning paradigms. The European Commission promotes the construction of a European Area of Education (www2) till 2025 having in mind the quality of European education. In the face diverse practices, where everyone can enjoy moments of training outside their communities of belonging, teacher training needs to go beyond the tradition and improve practices.

The COVID-19 pandemic forced us to find some creative solutions. Using new lenses to observe reality, online investigations could help to pose new questions and to quickly disseminate research findings. For example, international reports (OECD, 2021a, p. 19) focus on the need to use recent technologies to strengthen teachers' pedagogical skills and use evidence to find meaningful teaching methodologies.

According to a study on teacher professional identity (cit. in Suarez, McGrath, 2022; Karousiou et al., 2019), "teachers' professional identities influence not only their classroom practices but also the way they interpret and implement educational policies" (p. 7). The new formats of transmitting curricular content (online lessons, webinars, international group work using recent technologies to meet on virtual platforms) although already used, have been boosted worldwide because the pandemic affected all countries, and teaching typologies forced the development of effective and user-friendly transmission tools, both in the homes of stu-

dents and teachers. COVID-19 has become an innovation accelerator (Eradze et al., 2021) connecting professionals from different areas to build and complement distance learning platforms. However, the pandemic was also the time, when the realities of students living in various places and environments did not allow everyone to enjoy the same conditions of access to learning.

The lack of enough computers in households for school-age children, overcrowded living spaces, and the constant presence of the whole family in one place for weeks and months, revealed that in a pandemic situation, social inequalities become even greater. Face-to-face observation in the school place promotes the construction of interaction paradigms different from those that are produced in a virtual situation.

Through the voice of the participants of the teaching/learning process – researcher and participants – we want to identify how the change of the choreographic space (Alves, 2003; Paniagua, Istance, 2018) of the teacher – from the physical space of the classroom to virtual platforms – can condition the professional identity of the teacher. As Rovelli (2022, p. 47) points out, we need to combine three actions in one investigation: rebuilding, changing pieces, and adding.

The major questions posed in this paper were: What happened in the face of the need to change strategy without ICT resources? How to develop an investigation on teaching if participants do not have the necessary tools to participate (hardware, software, Internet access, digital skills). Rooted in the qualitative paradigm, this study can fit into emancipatory research that allows participants to problematize their situations (Marshall, Rossman, 2011). In order to give a voice to participants involved in the new challenges of online learning, we started an investigation using micro-ethnography (Garcez, 2017) as a support in researching the problem.

According to Trueba and Wright (1981), microethnographic research helps to better understand the educational process in multicultural settings. There were presented the situations regarding change in thinking about learning, e.g. leaving the classroom and direct contact with the teacher and transferring the whole process to the virtual room in constant interaction with the computer screen. In addition, social cooperation through information technology has been used to support distance learning.

> Face-to-face social interaction (or other live interaction mediated by phones and other technological media) is the most immediate and most frequently experienced social reality. The heart of our social and personal being lies in the immediate contact with other humans. (Peräkylä, 2005 in Marshall, Rossman, 2011, p. 20)

All research is interpretive, and in this case, we collect a set of interpretations related to the experience of each of the participants in order to reconstruct a narra-

tive that reinforces the professional teacher training from differentiated relational interfaces. Our goal is to translate the voice of those involved into a document, which contributes to reaching those with fewer opportunities.

WHAT ARE WE LOOKING FOR? (METHODOLOGIES)

Although this research is still incomplete, we wanted to share the narrative we have already prepared to give a voice to those who participated in the study and to support teacher training in unusual settings. At this moment, we are in the process of collecting personal narratives, using microethnographic[1] research, with different participants (researchers, teachers, parents, and students) to understand how the change of the space of social interaction, from face-to-face to virtual, compromised learning, (de)stabilized families' relationships and contributed to the exclusion of students and teachers.

As we participate in many European projects, we have access to different schools where teachers, researchers, families, and students are used to working on an international basis. So far, we have collected data from Higher Education teachers,[2] kindergarten teachers, pedagogues who teach children during the whole period of compulsory education, students who stayed at home during pandemic days, and their families. We want to have a broader view of the benefits and constraints that have arisen in the field of education.

We have used different forms of questions to access the interviewees' opinions *via* an online platform (Zoom/Teams/Meet), and a face-to-face interview. After the participants were authorized, we recorded the interviews and the transcript was returned to the participants to verify that the narrative is consistent with the interview. We have analysed international studies from different organizations linked to education (OECD, 2021b, UNESCO; European Commission) on the effects of the pandemic to corroborate our interpretations.

Knowing that microethnographic research is time-consuming and requires careful and continuous review of records, our research runs until March 2023. We need to identify the main elements and aspects of school-related organizations, understand the actions of individuals, and elaborate a research corpus that could be useful for future teacher training.

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[1] Micro-ethnography describes how interaction is socially and culturally organised in situational settings, such as classrooms, where key episodes of consequence for people's lives may be taking place during everyday routines.

[2] Until this moment we have interviewed two teachers from university; two students with special needs; one teacher from compulsory education; one preschool teacher; three parents of children with special educational needs.

QUESTIONING THE REALITY (RESULTS AND DISCUSSION)

We have already conducted some interviews with researchers from higher education institutions (Porto Polytechnic), students with educational needs (Lisbon University), and teachers in mainstream schools (Almada Schools Cluster). All of them have been involved in European projects. In the first listening to the interviews already conducted, using the model of grouping by codes and division into topics proposed by Robson (2013), it was possible to find coincident themes in three categories of respondents.[3] Despite representing various positions in the educational space, all the respondents focused on (Figure 1):

1. Disruptive communication due to instability of the digital network. Cutting online narratives often led to the fact that they did not to internalize the contents of the information.
2. The violation of personal space has led to difficult situations when compared to the picture students must provide on the screen.
3. Interaction with peers, for the online participants it is conditioned by the (web) link; by the timely availability taking into account different time zones.
4. Stress – pressure to turn on the camera, tiredness caused by excessive screen time, tension related to the workspace which, at the same time, is also the family space.

The differences in learning through digital learning modalities are related to the position that each one occupies in the educational hierarchy.

In the case of researchers, they demonstrated positive and rapid adjustment of communication platforms and the contribution to closer cooperation of research teams from different countries and help in the quick flow of information. The conclusions included in some international (Pokhrel, Chhetri, 2021) studies show that we are on the same path of understanding.

Referring to the teachers' responses to compulsory education, they stressed as positive learning to master computers, digital tools, educational software, etc. and, at the same time, providing opportunities to present the curriculum content using interactive methods that make a lesson more attractive. They referred, however, to the great overload that is associated with responding to pupils in a more individualized way. Our interpretation is consistent with other studies (Basilaia, Kvavadze, 2020; Tadesse, Muluye, 2020) that stated that shifting from face-to-face classes to online learning is challenging for teachers, students, families, and the country's government due to a lack of adequate financing, teaching skills, ICT infrastructure, Internet access, and educational resources.

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[3] To find the themes, we need to listen, read, and reread the transcripts often to find the meaning and then confirm it with the participant.
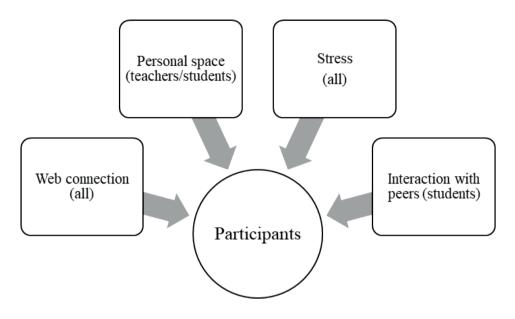
Figure 1. Codes/themes

Source: Author's own study.

For the students with special educational needs in, the most difficult fact during the pandemic was the lack of social interaction with peers. As Di Pietro et al. (2020) say, the "school's closure due to COVID-19 may not affect students equally. Students from less advantaged backgrounds highly suffered during COVID-19 than advantaged students" (EC, 2020, p. 4).

REBUILDING, CHANGING PIECES AND ADDING (A SHORT CONCLUSION)

A conclusion is always related to the here and now of an investigation. When we ask the participants, interpretation is conditioned by what we know about reality at that moment. In the case of the research presented here, it continues in the process of collecting data from participants from European universities, which will allow us to improve the conclusions.

In this article, we highlighted the interactions of the researcher with the participants and the first interpretative narrative about the collected data. The obtained conclusion is provisional. As we have already said, this research is currently ongoing and new data will be presented by the author next year (2023). Based on the interviews, we were able to identify the transition to new formats of the relationship

between the teacher and students (virtual vs. face-to-face), conditioned the emotional relationship, fundamental for a greater motivation for learning. The work of the teacher, although it seems facilitated (easier management of the subjects due to the formatting of online sessions) demonstrated an increase in preparation hours, learning of recent technologies, and difficulty in accessing students with weak technological resources. At the level of research, and the interaction between teams of researchers, the COVID-19 circumstances stimulated the development of differentiated and innovative look at procedures and sharing of strategies and discoveries.

Summarizing the preliminary research findings, the challenges posed by the pandemic-driven technological revolution are enormous, and we need to continue to investigate the effects of lockdown in the different sectors of education due to differences in the geographical location, the financial capability of families and countries and different skills of students. We need to further analyse the conditions of teachers' work and changes in the initial and continuing education of teachers.

Conflict of interests declaration

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