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The impact of distance learning on the social practices of schoolchildren during the COVID-19 pandemic: reconstructing values of migrant children in Poland

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ABSTRACT



In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Polish government decided to shut down all public and private institutions, including schools, from 12 March 2020. Since then, 4.58 million students from 24,000 schools have remained in their homes and practiced distance learning. Distance learning has greatly affected children's social practices, including domestic, everyday, specialist, and cultural practices. This paper applies social practice theory, rooted in Schatzki's ontological theory of practices, and Shove, Pantzar, and Watson's structure of social practices to study the changes to migrant primary school children's social practices during distance learning in Poland. The data are derived from a subsample of a larger qualitative study of the transnational transition processes of migrant children in Poland. This paper investigates how the COVID-19 lockdown and distance learning have prompted migrant primary school children to reflect on the transformation of traditional social practices and the value of school.

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KEYWORDS Distance learning; social practices; migrant children; values

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has had substantial repercussions in almost every sphere of human life, including its 'social, cultural, political, educational, psychological, and interpersonal' aspects (Markowska-Manista and Zakrzewska-Oleędzka 2020: 93). Many scholars, scientists, and analysts have been conducting studies of the pandemic's influence on various fields, including migration (Sirkeci and Yucesahin 2020), education (Ministertwo Edukacji Narodowej 2020; OECD 2020; UNESCO 2020), and families (Darmody 2020; WHO 2020). Studies with young

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people and children reveal the impact on the learning/teaching process, children's well-being, and how families function during times of chaos and disorganization caused by restrictions and limitations (Markowska-Manista and Zakrzewska-Olędzka 2020).

On 12 March 2020, the Polish government introduced restrictions aimed at diminishing the prevalence of COVID-19, a temporary shut-down of educational and cultural institutions (Kancelaria Prezesa Rady Ministrów 2020). There were further limitations on the movement of minors and changes in the workplace. Parks were closed, shopping was limited, and employees of public and private institutions had to work remotely. All these changes were put into effect on April 1 by the Polish Ministry of Interior and Administration (Serwis Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej 2020).

Consequently, changes in how institutions functioned have required modifications to common and long-established social practices, because 'the traditional daily routines, habits and patterns and the old tools that worked up to this moment are failing to function in the new situation' (Markowska-Manista and Zakrzewska-Olędzka 2020: 93). Social practices are repetitive actions that emphasize the reproduction of traditional meanings, previously established skills, and certain tools and technologies (Spurling *et al.* 2013), and thus these practices make history (Kemmis *et al.* 2014).

Welch (2016) mentions different types of practices, that is, specialist practices (going to work or school), cultural practices (socializing outside the home; visiting cultural sites; attending church or community meetings), everyday practices (daily routines, driving, or walking), and domestic practices (running a household to raising a family). These types of social practices reflect children's practices in the following way: specialist (learning), cultural (maintaining interpersonal skills and social contacts), everyday (daily routines), and domestic (relationships with parents and siblings).

This paper is based on the theory of social practices derived from Schatzki's (1996, 2005) ontological theory of practices as spatio-temporal entities. Besides, it employs the structure of social practices proposed by Shove *et al.* (2012), which consists of three integrated elements (material, competence, and meaning) to study the changes to children's learning practices, social relationships, and the change in daily routines during the COVID-19 outbreak. Additionally, it shows how the newly acquired practices affect children's values and attitudes toward school as an educational and social institution. I argue that a change in one of the

elements of the structure of social practices, namely the material, induces a transformation in the other two elements, competence and meaning, as discussed in detail below.

This paper contributes to the studies on the impact of COVID-19 on children's values' transformation. I focus on how specialist, cultural, and everyday social practices change during the schools' shutdown. Additionally, I demonstrate how distance learning shapes children's attitudes toward the role of the school as a learning and socializing space.

Social practices framework within educational studies

Social practices theory has a long history and a broad application in a variety of fields, including daily life (Shove *et al.* 2012), education (Kemmis *et al.* 2014), and learning (Alkemeyer and Burschmann 2017; Lave and Wenger 1991). The roots of the theory of social practices lie in Bourdieu's (1977: 82) concept of *habitus*, described as a 'product of history, [that] produces individual and collective practices'. The theory of social practices has been broadly employed by Theodore Schatzki (1996, 2005), who sees these practices as repetitive doings, happening at certain space–time arrangements (Schatzki 2003), through which one improves their abilities and skills.

When the practices become common for all the groups, they are called *collective practices* (Welch 2016). Children's collective practices are shaped by their daily routines and group activities organized at educational institutions.

Kemmis *et al.* (2014) distinguished three arrangements of social practices (cultural- discursive, material-economic, and social-political), which exist in sequential dimensions (semantic space, physical space–time, and social space). In such space structures, at home and in school the three dimensions overlap. Both home and school are spaces where children share their activities, knowledge, and feelings with family and classmates. They also constitute the physical space and time that construe the systems where the educational practices are shared and reproduced (Schatzki 2005) and also became vital social spaces to establish and maintain relationships.

The contemporary school system has not changed greatly since the mid-nineteenth century. Children acquire their learning practices through a long history of memories and interactions that are based on previously produced social patterns (Kemmis *et al.* 2014). Therefore, school is not merely an institution that provides instruction regarding the transition of knowledge and skills between generations, but also a

space where school participants from various positions interact while jointly performing practices (Alkemeyer and Burschmann 2017).

For many children, especially those who have experienced a transition from one school, place of residence, or even from one country to another, the school often becomes the only place to establish and maintain their social lives. It is also the only place to learn and share educational practices, as many parents are unable to adequately support their children for a variety of reasons (being new themselves to the local language and school culture, their adaptations, feeling overwhelmed by their employment or legalization status, etc.). Moreover, peers and school become important socialization agents (Popyk *et al.* 2019) and anchors in a host country not only for migrant children but also for their parents (Grzymała-Kazłowska 2018). Because of the COVID-19 outbreak and schools being shut, spaces were swapped and they stopped serving their traditional functions. The *school* has temporarily stopped being a place that construes new experiences based on old/traditional ones (Bourdieu 1990). Consequently, the *home* became the space where children, parents, and teachers performed their practices. Thus, distance learning resulted in a substitution (Spurling *et al.* 2013) of not only *specialist practices* – attending school, studying at school, methods of learning, etc. – but also *cultural, domestic, and everyday practices*.

Regarding the ways to change the education system, Kemmis *et al.* (2014: 3) claimed:

Education and schooling cannot be other than what they were yesterday and what they are today unless there are some significant transformations of the practices that reproduce schooling as we know it.

Thus, the traditional education system was automatically transformed because of the changes to the practices and learning/teaching modes from traditional models to distance learning. A study detailing the impact of the COVID-19 lockdown on families with children in Poland (Markowska- Manista and Zakrzewska-Ołędzka 2020: 90) noted:

Adults' and children's lives have moved online to an even greater degree, lost their rhythm of traditional preschool, school, and professional functioning. Suddenly, we have been pulled out of our daily rituals and responsibilities and held back in place.

To disclose the impact of distance learning on the transformation of practices and the consequences of this transformation, I applied Shove *et al.*'s (2012) concept of the structure of social practices.

Their concept, which is based on studies of science and technology, consists of the following three elements (mentioned above): *material* ('things, technology, tangible physical entities'), *competence* ('skills and know-how'), and *meaning* ('symbolic meanings, ideas and aspirations') (Shove *et al.* 2012: 14). The material element discloses the learning/teaching mode at schools; competencies are the skills every actor in the learning/teaching process must acquire to adapt to the material element; meaning signifies the actors' values and attitudes toward their relationships since 'learning [is] embedded in social (power) relations' (Alkemeyer and Burschmann 2017: 14).

Shove *et al.* (2012) state that different correlations between the three elements of the social practices can occur within three different scenarios: before the links are made (proto-practices) when they are made (practices), and after they are broken (ex-practices). Proto-practices existed before implementing distance learning and, thus, there were no links yet between the elements. In the second scenario, the current process of social practices performed during distance learning illustrates a full integration of the three elements. In the final scenario, however, there are no links between the elements. Concretely, this represents the temporary interruption of traditional education and demonstrates what will happen to the social practices of distance learning once the school shutdown ends and children return to school. My analysis portrays how the practices are invented or disappear when the links are established and broken between the elements of the specialist, cultural, and everyday practices that migrant children have performed during distance learning in Poland.

Migrant children in Poland

An unprecedented number of 44,000 foreign-born children attended Polish schools in the 2018/2019 academic year (Ministerstwo Edukacji Narodowej, 2019). Although this might be a novel phenomenon in the country, media, politicians, and scholars worldwide have drawn attention to the issue of migrant children for the last few decades because the visibility of migrant children is linked to the growing number of migrants globally (Miller and Castles 2009; Okólski 2012).

In the context of global mass-mobility, Poland as a country of origin has remained a host to a homogeneous nation. According to the Migration Data Portal in 2019, the share of international migrants in Poland was 1.9%. The United Nations informs that, in 2019, the

number of immigrants in Poland reached 656,000, and about 14% were under 19 years of age. This means that migrant adults arrived in Poland together with their children and the young population becomes more and more visible.

Previous studies investigated how schools cope with the changing situation (Grzymała-Kazłowska *et al.* 2008). However, limited data are available on transnational transitions (Pustułka and Trąbka 2019) of migrant children, especially those arriving from Ukraine, which constitutes the major ethnic minority group in Poland (Urząd do Spraw Cudzoziemców 2020¹), and Turkey, which constitutes a small share of the immigrants in Poland but is worth paying attention to given the cultural and religious differences between Turkish and Polish cultures (Andrejuk 2019). These two groups of migrant children, Ukrainian and Turkish, were given major attention in the present research.

Migration experiences greatly influence the specialist (educational) and cultural (interpersonal) practices of migrant children in a host country. The post-migration adaptation depends on numerous aspects, among which school and family contexts (Rumbaut 2005). The school is a key, and often the only, space for migrant children's language and culture adaptation, as well as for maintaining peer relations, which influence children's well-being and motivation to go to school (Vandell 2000). Consequently, the COVID-19 shutdown brought another transition to migrant children's lives and formation of practices, as presented below.

Methods and materials

The study of the transformation of children's social practices is based on the subsample of a larger qualitative study of the transnational transition process for migrant children in Poland, which consists of 49 interviews with children aged 7–13 ($N=20$), their parents ($N=19$), and teachers ($N=10$).² This paper presents the outcomes of the interviews with 19 primary school children, with a migration background (the first interview took place before the lockdown and was held face-to-face) (see Table 1). In part, the interviews aimed to study the impact of distance learning on children's transnational transitions, learning processes, and maintenance of relationships with peers during the school shutdown. Purposeful

¹Data on some immigrants in Poland holding a legal status, 1 January 2020.

²The research was conducted in five languages, Polish, English, Ukrainian, Russian, and Turkish. All quotations were translated by the author.

Table 1. Overview of the respondents' socio-demographic characteristics.

No	Pseudonym	Gender	Country of origin	Language of interview	Age	Grade	Time in Poland (yrs)	Type of school
1	Igor	Boy	Ukraine	RU	13	8	2	public
2	Antony	Boy	Ukraine	RU	12	6	1	public
3	Michele	Boy	Romania	EN	12	6	6	private
4	Katie	Girl	Turkey	EN	9	4	3	public
5	Anna	Girl	Turkey	TR/PL	13	7	4	private
6	Ali	Boy	Turkey	EN	12	6	4	public
7	Emel	Boy	Turkey	EN	12	6	4	private
8	Zeliha	Girl	Turkey	TR/PL	10	5	3	private
9	Ismail	Boy	Turkey	EN	11	5	2	public
10	Rabia	Girl	Turkey	TR/PL	12	6	4	public
11	Omer	Boy	Turkey	EN	11	5	2	private
12	Sadik	Boy	Turkey	EN	13	7	2	private
13	Liliana	Girl	Lithuania	EN	11	5	4	private
14	Mehmet	Boy	Turkey	TR/PL	11	3	2	public
15	Duran	Boy	Turkey	TR/PL	10	3	2	public
16	Serife	Girl	Turkey	EN	12	6	3	public
17	Meryem	Girl	Turkey	TR/PL	13	6	3	public
18	Yulia	Girl	Ukraine	UA	9	3	2	public
19	Natalia	Girl	Ukraine	UA	12	6	1	public

sampling was used in the study, whereas the channels of recruitment involved the researcher's contacts and snowball sampling technique. The study adopts the child-centered approach (Merriman and Guerin 2006) and active listening to children (Clark and Moss 2001), wherein the interviews with parents and teachers aimed to set the socio-demographic background of immigrant children. The research was conducted in June and July 2020 using Zoom for communicating and recording. All data and materials were directly saved onto an external hard drive accessed only by the researcher. The interviews were held in different languages, that is, English, Polish, Ukrainian, Russian, and Turkish (with the presence of a qualified interpreter), to provide the respondents with comfort and the opportunity to express themselves in a native/comprehensive language.

The research follows all the requirements and guidelines on research including children and was approved by the appropriate ethics committee. All study participants gave informed voluntary consent, which was presented in the participants' native language to avoid ambiguous interpretations. The consent form contained information regarding anonymity, the confidentiality of the interviews, aims and procedure of the research, the methods of storing and analyzing the data and using personal data, disseminating the outcomes, as well as the possible discomfort occurrence and the ways the researcher would avoid, minimize, or eliminate this possibility.

The analysis of the data followed these steps: meticulous transcription of recordings (voice- to-text), developing and applying codes to all material, identifying themes, patterns, and relationships concerning the created codes, summarizing the data (Saldana 2009). The information was analyzed through thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006).

Findings

The outcomes of the interviews with immigrant children proved the paramount role of the school as both a learning and a socializing institution. The significance of school was highlighted during the COVID-19 lockdown and online learning. Among the issues of distance learning experienced by immigrant children, the following prevailed:

- (1) Learning issues
 - (a) specialist practices (going to school, mode of learning)
 - (b) everyday practices (daily routine, schedule)
- (2) Social life issues
 - (a) cultural practices (social contact, visiting cultural places)

The children emphasized that online education had been fairly unsuccessful because of the learning issues related to the disturbances caused to their specialist practices. All respondents stated that they found it difficult to understand the school material while sitting in front of screens. Thus, as the method of learning changed, children had to master new learning practices. Acquiring new skills involved another challenge for the migrant children, who were in the process of getting acquainted with the new norms and rules of educational practices in a host country:

First, I thought having classes online would be good, but I don't like online classes very much, and I don't learn things like this. I missed two months of online lessons ... Teachers are trying to do their best, but some of the teachers don't give clear information, and it is quite hard to learn like this. (Anna, TR, 13 yrs. old/4 yrs. In-country)

For example, eye contact. Looking directly at the teacher is very important; it is very helpful. But it's because of this pandemic that learning is hard. (Katie, TR, 9 yrs. old/3 yrs. In-country)

Moreover, after the schools' shutdown, children were overwhelmed with work, because teachers used the strategy of sending most of the information as homework to save time familiarizing themselves with online

tools. For the newcomers, homework took lots of time and effort, as they had to translate the material to their native language, learn it and do the tasks with the help of parents or siblings, and translate it back to Polish. Thus, migrant children had to develop their learning skills, as their educational practices relied on individual work and parents' support – this effect was compounded during the shutdown:

At first, they were sending too much homework. They were sending us lots of documents. Finish this. Watch this. Do this. Finish this. (Yulia, UA, 9 yrs. old/2 yrs. In-country)

Teachers are giving too much homework. They're saying do this because we need to get grades. (Anna, TR, 12 yrs. old/4 yrs. In-country)

Our extra Polish teacher was giving us so much homework. (Sadik, Tr, 13 yrs. old/2 yrs. In- country)

Overloaded with lectures and information, children appeared to have gaps in their knowledge, as some parents could not provide any support. As a result, the new specialist practices led to frustration and demotivation for some migrant children:

If we do not have online lessons, we have offline lessons. The teacher can't explain things to you well because they usually have another lesson with somebody else. So, it's just really frustrating. (Liliana, LT, 11 yrs. old/4 yrs. In-country)

Nevertheless, two of the student respondents, who had difficulties with comprehending the material at school and were shy to reach a teacher or classmate for help, found distance learning advantageous. At homeschooling, they had more time to check the material on the Internet or consult the adults. Their new learning practices had a positive impact on their psychological well-being and a positive perception of distance education:

In online lessons, we don't learn so much, but they are less stressful, normal school is more stressful, but I had better grades. (Emel, TR, 12 yrs. old/4 yrs. In-country)

Frankly speaking, it is easier for me, because if I don't know anything, I can check the Internet. When I was at school it was hard to understand the material. At home, I can use the translator and check it out. (Meryem, TR, 13 yrs. old/3 yrs. In-country)

In a new learning mode, children intertwined their educational and everyday practices with cultural practices, and communication with family members or friends, during 'school time'. All of the young

participants stated that distance learning positively altered their everyday practices as daily routines and schedules were transformed. Thus, the home became a united spatio-temporal entity for performing children's school and home duties:

The good part is that I can stay home and do whatever I want. (Michele, Ro, 12 yrs. old/6 yrs. In-country)

We are at home and in breaks, I can just go and talk with my family, but at school when I want to go home, I can't. Also, when I want to eat during the lesson, I can't. (Emel, TR, 12 yrs. old/4 yrs. In-country)

Another challenge of the shutdown concerned the reduced personal meetings, which, consequently, influenced children's social lives, transferring them to the virtual world or making them feel lonely at home. The lack of personal contact with peers led to a change in children's communication practices with both positive (e.g. fast and frequent contact) and negative consequences (e.g. increase of cyberbullying, social exclusion). Virtual communication disturbs the social lives of those who have poor access to information and communication technologies, as well for those whose only source of interaction with peers was the school. Hence, during the shutdown, migrant children valued school more than before:

It's kind of boring because I cannot go outside and socialize. I want to meet my friends, not through a computer but actually meet them. (Michele, RO, 12 yrs. old/6 yrs. In-country)

I had never liked this school, but now, when we stay at home, I started missing it. I had never thought that I would miss school. (Natalia, UA, 12 yrs. old/1 yr. In-country)

My phone broke. That's why I can't contact anybody. I am waiting for [it to be] repair[ed] (Ali, TR, 12 yrs. old/4 yrs. In-country)

Further, the COVID-19 lockdown suspended the social lives of 15 out of the 19 respondents, as school and community members' meetings (popular among the Turkish families) have been the only socialization spaces out of school. The community meeting is an important space not only to cultivate the cultural practices of migrant children but also to support each other during the transnational transitions (Pustułka and Trąbka 2019).

Discussion and conclusions

The COVID-19 outbreak and school shutdown undoubtedly had an impact on the social practices of school-aged children. Specialist practices

were modified by changes to the learning mode and the performance of everyday practices. Moreover, cultural practices moved online, with positive and negative effects. In terms of the structure of social practices, two elements – material (learning mode) and competence (skills to learn through distance) – were reshaped and new between-element links were established. This, consequently, required adjustments to the third element, meaning, (attitude toward school as a learning/teaching and socializing space).

Shove *et al.* (2012) demonstrated a change in the practice and modification of the links between the practice elements through the example of automobiles replacing horse-drawn carriages: changes to the material element rendered old practices redundant; thus, drivers and mechanics had to acquire new competencies.

This linkage of the elements to of the social practice structure demonstrates that traditional school practices have temporally become *ex-practices* because the links between the elements were broken. Additionally, they were substituted by the new educational, everyday, and communication practices of children.

Hence, I argue that children who acquired new skills and competences at learning, communicating, managing social relations, and performing everyday practices during the shutdown gave a new meaning to their current educational practices and interpersonal skills. Moreover, home-schooling migrant children stressed the importance of school and face-to-face social life.

Some migrant children realized after the shutdown that personal contacts with teachers and peers lay the ground for a successful learning process. Moreover, during the lockdown, immigrant children gave greater value to the school as a socialization space, where they establish and maintain their social contacts, which often are the only acquaintances in a host country.

Additionally, the schoolchildren's collective practices (Kemmis *et al.* 2014) have been substituted by the separate practices of each child, who had to individually manage the new learning process. Hence, collective educational practices have temporarily become *ex-practices* (Shove *et al.* 2012). Thus, children's new individual specialist (learning on distance) and cultural (maintaining social relationships on distance) practices are in the second scenario of the social practice structure (Shove *et al.* 2012).

Furthermore, the spatio-temporal entities (Schatzki 2005) have changed because of the social practices of schoolchildren and the new arrangements and shift in the three dimensions (semantic space, physical

space–time, and social space of shared doing and relations) (Kemmis *et al.* 2014).

To summarize, this study analyzed the changes to the social practices resulted from COVID-19, particularly the shutdown of public and private institutions. I demonstrated how the links between elements of these practices were established and maintained. Additionally, I disclosed how distance learning shaped students' values and attitudes toward school and social life. Further research is needed to gain more insights into how different social practices acquired by children, parents, and teachers will develop and be shaped in the future, especially after schools are open and in session again.

Some limitations of the study should be noted. First, the research was conducted using qualitative methods with a group of migrant children in Poland, which does not constitute a representative group of Polish children. However, the study's outcomes were consistent with the findings of Markowska-Manista and Zakrzewska-Oleđzka (2020) on the impact of COVID-19 on families in Poland. Second, qualitative research with children using online interview techniques is not yet popular among researchers in Poland. Nonetheless, the study was conducted three months after distance learning started; thus, the children were well-acquainted with the online tools.

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Anzhela Popyk is a PhD candidate at the University SWPS, Warsaw, and a Researcher at SWPS Youth Research Center. Her research focuses on transnational transitions and formation of sense of belonging among migrant children in Poland.

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