STUDENTS' DISCOURSES DURING THE ONLINE DISTANCE LEARNING IN THE FIRST WAVE OF THE COVID19 PANDEMIC: AN ACTION RESEARCH WITH STUDENTS AS CO-RESEARCHERS

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic affected education communities by turning students and teachers abruptly to online teaching. This imposition of digital education is being investigated by various researchers all over the world since it has changed the way we conceive of the use of technology in classrooms and in our lives in general. Nevertheless, the students' voice is being neglected and not taken seriously into account. In this paper an action research is presented with the teacher acting as researcher and the students as co-researchers. This action research took place during the first wave of the pandemic (March 2020-May 2020) in Crete, Greece. The students, after investigating the online education in general and after various discussions, in their final accounts reflected upon a. the changes in their role as students, b. the changes in the role of the teacher, c. they proposed the role that a teacher should have today. The teacher-researcher analyzed these three categories with Critical Discourse Analysis to identify the discourses the students promoted or silenced. The findings showed that online education is not a success story as promoted by researchers, policymakers, and other stakeholders; rather it lacks human elements like humor, psychological support, and instant interaction.

INTRODUCTION

The COVID19 pandemic has affected all sectors of society and in particular education, since it has led this sector to an unprecedented crisis when the educational communities shifted so abruptly from offline to online courses (Assuncao Flores & Gago, 2020). This abrupt shift left spaces for companies like Google Classrooms, Zoom, Cisco WebEx, Microsoft Teams, and Edmodo to enter homes and to be part of everyday school practices.

The use of technology in the classroom was a need in developed countries from the '70s and early '80s (Howard & Mozejko, 2015). Nevertheless, it was the COVID19 pandemic in March 2020 that led to a large number of students using not only digital but online education all over the world, including Crete where the research was carried out.

Several scholars have started dealing with this impressive turn to digital online education and have tried to evaluate the impact of this phenomenon at the macro-level by investigating the impact on society, education and future working conditions. There are well-known scholars that tried to explain what has happened in education in general (Selwyn & Jandric, 2020) or how it is going to affect education in the future (Code et al., 2020). Other articles were more focused on specific areas like the education of teachers in service (Akar & Erden, 2021; Assuncao Flores & Gago, 2020; Lwin et al., 2022) Κάντε κλικ ή πατήστε εδώ για να εισαγάγετε κείμενο. or the inequality issues in particular places in the world (Abioui et al., 2020; Demir Kaymak & Horzum, 2022; Van & Thi, 2021; Vaz, 2022).

Some other scholars focused more specifically on the impact of the learning and teaching practices and the change in the participants' role (Niemi & Kousa, 2020). These kinds of research identify the insights into the micro-level of a classroom, like the students' low motivation or the teachers' weakness in monitoring their students' online progress.

Although there are studies that focus on students' voices in universities and communities(Kong et al., 2022; Mojica & Upmacis, 2022; To et al., 2022; Vaz, 2022), there seems to be a lack of research on students' voices and free expression of their opinion in school settings, away from predetermined answers in questionnaires. Furthermore, there is also a lack of research which attempts to connect the micro-level with the macro-level.

The main aim of this paper is to contribute to the discussion about the rapid adoption of online education due to the COVID19 pandemic: a. offering students' unique insights which were developed through the participatory activities in an action research project, in which the students took an active role as co-researchers, and b. connecting the micro-level with the macro-level using Critical Discourse Analysis.

BACKGROUND

The Promotion of Students' Voice in Educational Changes and Innovation

The students can contribute significantly to discussions about educational issues which they experience. As Mok (1997, p. 318)argues, students know their educational needs and their problems and therefore they are in a privileged position to express what they need to learn and in which way they can learn it better and more effectively. In a democratic society it is the students' right to intervene in decision-making that affects their learning.

The active participation of students in research is beneficial for the students themselves, the teachers and the education community in general. The young people have unique insights into learning, teaching and schooling. The adults should pay attention to these insights, the problems that students confront and the ways these problems can be investigated in a specific local context.

Through participative approaches the educational practices are getting better, the students raise their academic competences by enhancing their responsibility and producing knowledge that can affect policies and practices in their school (D. L. Mitra, 2004) . When the students participate so actively, the relations between students and teachers get better, since teaching is seen as a mutual attempt to change the problematic situations; through this mutual attempt and the building of beneficial relations, there is a chance to discover the inconsistencies and the issues that cause problems in the teaching and learning procedures (Flutter & Rudduck, 2004). In order to carry out these procedures, there is a need to develop dialogue and mutual trust between the participants.

The students' perspectives are crucial in the teacher's reflection, because with honesty and consistency they express with clarity the problematic situations and therefore should be seriously taken into account (Cullingford, 1991). These voices can offer a clearer representation of the failures of the education system (D. Mitra, 2001). These representations can be made in research settings, where they can be discussed and seriously considered.

Furthermore, these structural changes where the students are becoming active participants in research projects are based on democratic values and guide the future citizens in this direction (Hart, 1997). The students understand that their approaches are unique and crucial to the evaluation, assessment and improvement of their learning. Participating in decision-making transforms them from active learners to active citizens.

THE STUDY

The study is action research with the researcher acting as a teacher-researcher and the students as co-researchers (Fielding, 2001, 2011). Κάντε κλικ ή πατήστε εδώ για να εισαγάγετε κείμενο. As action research, it can be characterized as a case study since the implementation took place in a specific context. It is also qualitative research since the main goal is to discover the participants' perspectives through analyzing the students' journals with Critical Discourse Analysis.

Research Questions

The goal of this study is to promote and discuss the students' representations regarding their distance learning experiences during the COVID19 pandemic. For this reason, the study will focus on the discursive features marked in their personal diaries. Research questions are as follows: Which discourses did the students (re) produce about the teaching practices during the COVID 19 pandemic? How did the students represent their own role? How did the students represent the teacher's role?

Context and Participants

This research took place in the Experimental Junior High School (12–15-year-old students) in the first grade (12-13 years old), which collaborates with the University of Crete and, therefore, it can be supported by experts and academics. Conducting research is one of the school's roles. The students are chosen by lot, and it is a gender-balanced school (not class). In the specific class there were 23 students (9 boys and 14 girls). The group was mixed concerning socioeconomic class, abilities and origin. 5% of the students were second-generation immigrants from Albania, Turkiye and India.

In this action research, the author of this paper was the facilitator and the teacher-researcher, and the students acted as co-researchers. They were aware that we were conducting research. Action research has been utilized productively in literacy studies (Katsarou, 2013; Staples, 2012), and this research took place as a literacy and research event in the Course of Modern Greek (L1).

The Teaching and Research Intervention

The action research lasted two and half months (from March to May 2020), when the schools in Greece were in lockdown to control the spread of COVID19. Very rapidly the students were forced to continue their schooling through digital means. WebEx was financed by the Greek government for synchronous online courses and several platforms were constructed by the state such as e-me and e-class (this platform existed before but was enhanced during this period). The Experimental Junior High School promoted the use of Edmodo, which had been used since 2011. The students were more familiar with this platform, so its use was readily accepted by the particular learning and teaching community. The students attended synchronous online courses from 8:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. and afterwards they had to send their exercises to the asynchronous online platform where the educational material was also uploaded. For the synchronous education the ministry provided the WebEx Cisco communication tool.

As shown in Table I, the action research took place in two cycles. In the Modern Greek course, the teacher and students dealt with general themes such as nutrition, the environment and cinema. In the A cycle the students worked on the general theme of school. The students brought texts (such as Harry Potter "The Order of the Phoenix", the extract with the austere Professor Umbridge) and movies such as L'ecole buissonnière (1949) and Summerhill (2008). They analyzed the texts and noticed different teaching and learning methods, and discussed thoroughly the role of the teacher and the learner in various contexts. From the discussion, the students mentioned the changes in teaching and learning practices due to the pandemic and the abrupt start of online teaching in their lives. After this discussion, the students in the B cycle acted as auto-ethnographers and expressed their thoughts in final accounts where they focused on the online learning and teaching practices during the COVID19 pandemic.
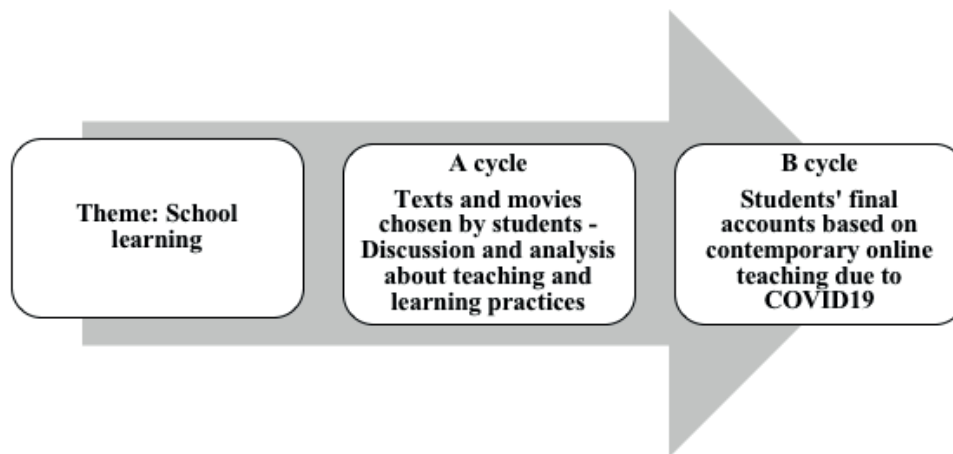
Figure 1. Teaching and Research intervention

In the B cycle, the students acted as auto-ethnographers. Ethnography in general has been used in education since the 1980s and it is the detailed observation of particular forms and a written (or sometimes audio-visual) account, based on social and cultural theory. In an action-research like this one, it promotes the students' voice and gives them the opportunity to express freely their thoughts since they are empowered as co-researchers (Fielding & Bragg, 2003).

Methodology

After this second cycle, the teacher-researcher (hence TR) analyzed the data based on the thematic categories the students had chosen and conducted Critical Discourse Analysis using Halliday's Systemic-Functional Grammar (see next chapter for details about the use of SFG).

Data Collection and Analysis

From this particular intervention the TR collected 23 written accounts from the students in a particular class, 9 boys and 14 girls, where 5% are from a foreign country and have a different first language, culture and religion. Due to protection of their personal data, the students have nicknames in the findings section.

In the analysis the TR followed the themes the students had put forward during their discussions and the themes that dominated their written accounts. These themes represented the discussion that took place in the online classroom during the analysis of the texts and the movies. The themes were: a. the difficulties the students faced in online education, b. the differences the students noticed in the teacher's role in the online and the offline courses, c. the role and the knowledge the teachers should have. After the discussions, the TR conducted Critical Discourse Analysis.

Critical Discourse Analysis in Action Research Projects

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is an important qualitative communication tool that critically describes, interprets and explains the ways discourses construct and legitimize social inequalities. As a method, CDA investigates "which options are chosen in which institutional and social contexts, and why these choices have been made, what interests are served by them, and what purposes achieved"(van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 33). In other words, CDA tries to reveal the ways in which language, society and ideologies are connected by analyzing the micro-level of texts (oral, written, visual) and the macro-level, which refers to the social structures and the power relations in these texts. CDA as a method used in this particular research is described in the next section.

In action research projects with a critical dimension, where the main goal is to give voice to participants and understand in depth the theories, ideologies and stances they promote, silence or undermine, CDA offers the suitable tools to connect the classroom micro-level with the social injustice and the power relations that construct and preserve this injustice.

In an action research project, the teacher-researchers take decisions and gradually make choices that shape their practices. CDA can illuminate how these decisions have been taken and help them understand the educational process in a political and socially-grounded discourse analysis. In this case the teacher-researcher can pose questions such as: "How does discourse shape social relations? Who has a voice to speak?, How does discourse express power and refined ways of social control?" (Katsarou, 2013, p. 196).

Action research is politically oriented and promotes empowerment and emancipation (Carr & Kemmis, 2005). In this action research the TR promotes the students' voices and in order to understand in depth the discourses the students promote, and understand as a teacher the institutional power that shapes the students' voices, the TR conducted CDA (Katsarou, 2013).

In this case, CDA assisted in the identification of a. the social actors (teacher, students and policy makers) and the identities that are promoted; b. the reasons these identities and social actors were constructed in a particular way; c. which interests and which purposes these particular constructions serve.

The CDA connected the micro-level (the linguistic items like words, syntax, transitivity, modality, presupposition) with the macro-level (the institutions, the discourses, the practices and the ideologies they promoted). CDA has a strong political influence, since it develops theories to question and modify particular common practices (Horkheimer, 1937; 2014).

In this analysis the TR followed Richardson (2007), who states that CDA focuses on: a. a mutually constituting nature of discourse and society; b. context discourse; c. the ideological nature of language; d. social issues; e. power relations, representations of agency (space to act for an actor) and structure (restrictions to this space); f. systemic interpretation and explanation (Richardson, 2007, pp. 26-27).

Regarding identities, (Richardson, 2007) claims that all people "possess a range of identities, roles and characteristics that could be used to describe us equally accurately but not with the same meaning" (Richardson, 2007, p. 49). He acknowledges the fluidity of identities and the fact that meaning-making is not one and unique.

Subsequently, in order to understand the teacher-students identity, scholars need to define the specific society where the identity is constructed (e.g. Greece), the particular context (e.g. online teaching during the COVID19 pandemic), that the language transmits specific ideologies (e.g. teachers "not having the necessary knowledge"), the social issues that come to the surface (e.g. no funding for students that do not have money to buy laptops), what the actors can or cannot do (e.g. the Ministry of Education should or should not provide money) and, of course, the ideological consequences and explanations of this identity (e.g. the role of online education).

This approach is useful to interpret the data, because it connects precisely the micro-level (e.g. lexical analysis, syntax structure), with the macro-level (e.g. the ideological and social consequences). More specifically, it gives the opportunity to connect language representations with the ideological aspects and perspectives that are taken for granted by particular discourses within certain practices.

Lexical analysis and transitivity helped me answer questions such as: Which social actors do the students' texts refer to? Which words (e.g. nouns) are used to refer to the actor? Which words (e.g. verbs) are used to refer to the actors' deeds?, Which grammar is used to refer to the actors? Which structures suggest agency?

FINDINGS

The presentation of the main finding is based on the thematic categories identified by the students: 1. The difficulties we (as students) face. 2. The changes in the teacher's role 3. What the teacher should/must do. The subtitles of these main categories arose after the CDA . In the findings section, I tried to present excerpts from almost all the students. Figure 2 shows the main themes and the sub-themes. The following table (Table 1) summarizes the findings with examples from the students' excerpts:
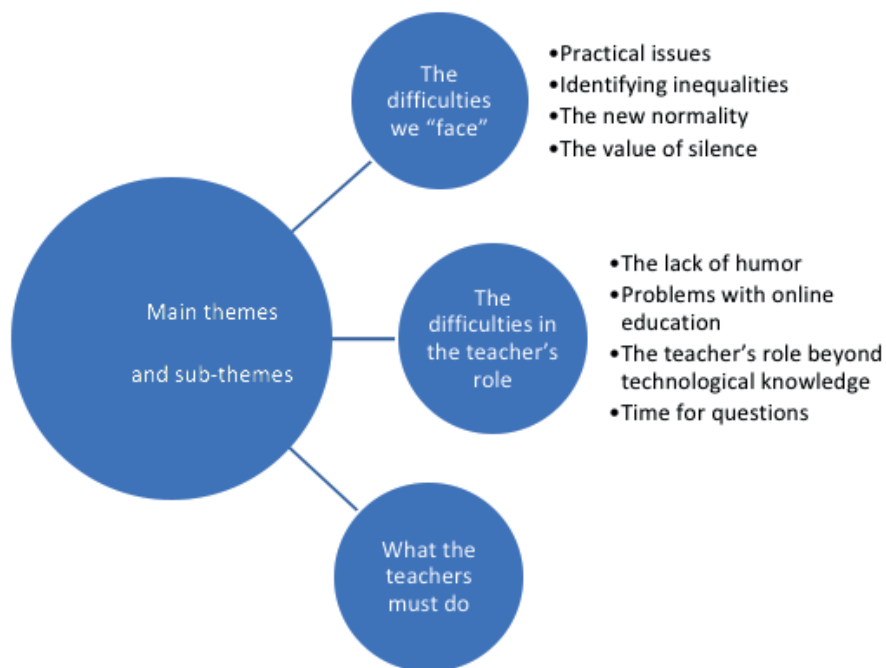
Figure 2. Visualization of the themes and the subthemes

Table 1. Summary of the findings with examples from students' excerpts

Main themes	Subthemes	Examples from students' excerpts (exc.)
The difficulties we "face"	Practical issues	-bad (internet) connection (exc. 1)
		-(when) we ask something we have to wait (exc. 1)
		-Miss classmates and teachers (exc. 1)
	Identifying inequalities	-No (strong) internet connection (exc. 2, 3)
		-No proper devices (exc.2, 3)
		-Parents cannot help (exc. 4)
	The new normality	-Familiar with this way of learning (exc. 5)
		-Problematic distance education is better than no education (exc. 6)
	Silence as a value in online distance education – a marginalized perspective	-Online education is not so noisy as in the classroom (exc. 7)
The difficulties in the teacher's role	The lack of humor	-Most of the teachers have changed their behavior (exc.8)
		-(teachers) are not familiar with this kind of learning (exc. 8)
	Problems with online education	-The teachers have problems with this kind of education (exc. 9)
	The teacher's role beyond technological knowledge	- Many hadn't the necessary knowledge […] the technical means to cope with this procedure (exc. 10)
		- the role of the teacher is more basic in stuff such as immediate communication, exchanging ideas, instant help and offering knowledge (exc. 11)
		-cannot have contact with another student (exc. 12)
	Online education allows time for questions	- The teachers in online distance education are calmer, as well as us (the students) (exc. 13)

What the teachers must do	- The teacher must help children to discover their talents and to give them knowledge that will be useful for the future. (exc. 15)
	-The teacher should promote collaboration […] have fun and make us feel better and not get bored (exc. 14)
	- The classroom is not simply four walls with desks and chairs, but a relationship based on confidence, a community, a living organism (exc. 16)

The Difficulties "We Face"

Practical issues

One of the main problems the students identified was the emergence of several practical issues. For example, the time it took for a student's question to be answered by the teacher, the lack of internet connection and the demand for PCs in houses, where many students needed electronic devices, as well as the parents who also had to work online.

Excerpt **1**.

> *The difficulties I deal with as a student with the online education in the COVID 19 period have to do with practical issues and technology. Many times, the internet has a bad connection because my other two siblings are also doing online courses. Sometimes I also have problems because I cannot upload an exercise and when I want to ask something I have to wait until the next lesson. I also forget that I have tasks to do, and I miss my classmates and my teachers so much.* (Yiannis St2 – 12 years old)

In this excerpt, the abstract entity "difficulties" appeared as the student's main problem, and the student refers to himself with the general entity "as a student". These problems that he "deals with" are connected with the next proposition with "practical issues" and "technology". These entities are more concrete, and the student realized the exact problems he had. In the next proposition the source of the problems is identified: 1. the bad internet connection; 2. two siblings that also attend online courses; 3. his knowledge concerning uploading. The student presents himself (repetition of first singular "I") to be responsible for his knowledge of technology and does not try to discover the reasons why the internet connection is so bad nor why his family lacks electronic devices. At the end of his paragraph, although he has referred to these problems, he concludes that his questions needed to wait, that he forgets he has tasks to do and that he misses his classmates and his teachers. In addition, he refers to more problems that arise from online education. Although the last sentence (I miss…teachers) sounds irrelevant, it seems to be the voice that tries to find a way to be expressed. The main problem for the student might not be the internet or the lack of PCs, but rather the lack of communication with his classmates and teachers.

Although the student started with practical issues and referred to other problems such as the delay in answering his questions, as shown from the ending of his paragraph, this is also a structural space where the student evaluates what he describes and provides an overall point of view; the most important aspect for him is real life communication. Learning is not a situation that should be associated with electronic devices; for the students, their classmates, relationships and human communication seem to be the most important elements.

In other excerpts the students constructed a more collective identity through which they expressed their stances. For instance, Emmanuela St5 (12 years old) says that "we cannot connect with" regarding the same problem. In this case, agency is more collective, and it is not a personal matter, as it was for Yiannis in excerpt 1, who insisted on using the first-person singular ('I').

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Identifying inequalities

Another issue is the political angle of the practical problems Yiannis St2 expressed. Although this student seemed to neglect the political factor and insisted that online teaching has practical issues like problems with the internet connection, many students mentioned financial difficulties which they and their families dealt with during the COVID19 pandemic.

Excerpt 2.

> *The internet connection is not always possible, and some online platforms are not working, so I couldn't switch on the microphone and follow the course. Generally, some students might have a lack of laptops, or they do not have the internet* (Paschalis St6 – 12 years old)

In contrast with Yiannis, although Paschalis referred to the same problems as the slow platforms, the bad connection and other technical problems, in the next proposition he started with the discourse marker "generally" and he actually identified a social group (some students) that might have access problems arising from the "lack of laptops" or the "internet connection". This excerpt is different from Yiannis's because another social group is identified, and the student realized that all the students are not the same.

In the next excerpt, Michalis is aligned with Paschalis and he also identified that the students are separated into different social groups with access problems ("cannot participate in the online courses"). He also identified another group concerning the cultural environment in which the students have been raised. Michalis clearly connected "opportunity" with financial issues.

Excerpt 3.

> *Many students do not have a strong internet connection, or not even the internet, and they cannot participate in the online course. It is also an important problem that many students do not have the opportunity to buy the proper electronic device and attend the courses* (Michalis St10 – 12 years old)

It is important for the students to have identified these inequalities and also to have acknowledged the existence of different social groups. In most cases, the educational setting treats the students as a homogenized bundle of people. Nevertheless, in these excerpts the students have identified social issues that have come to the surface due to the pandemic. Another issue that emerged from the students was cultural background and especially the role the educated and non-educated parents can play. Initially, Petros was aligned with Yiannis and referred to the main problems they were dealing with, such as the siblings that also attended online courses and the parents that had to use the laptops for work.

Excerpt 4.

> *All the students do not have an internet connection in their houses and most of us have brothers and parents that also use the laptop and we have to connect through our mobiles (…) Additionally, all the students are not familiar with all the web tools and some face difficulties and waste a lot of time, since they cannot ask for help not even from their parents, especially when they also know only the basics* (Petros St3 – 12 years old)

What is more, in Petros's case he connected learning with parents' cultural and educational capital. When the parents have knowledge of ICT, their children can have easier access to online education. In the pandemic the main burden was on the students, neglecting the fact that the students need help and that the parents are not always knowledgeable about technology. Petros identified crucial issues that showed that inequality is reproduced from the family's educational capital.

The "New Normality"

Another issue that emerged from the data was that the students seemed to accept this learning situation as a normality that will last for a long time, even though it was well known that it would last only for a while.

Excerpt 5.

It is still difficult, spending so much time in front of a laptop! Finally, despite all the problems and the difficulties, I believe that I will learn to be familiar with living in this way (Katerina St4 – 12 years old)

The student starts with a mental verb, because the phrase "it's difficult" in Greek is realized with a verb (disko´levome- 1st person singular) and the goal of this mental verb is the next proposition "spending so much time". The annoyance the student feels can be identified in the use of the exclamation mark in the first proposition. Although Katerina has realized the "problems" and the "difficulties", there seems to be a series of propositions where the only person responsible for the situation is her. In all the actions that needed to be done, "learn", "be familiar with", Katerina recognizes herself as the only person responsible. This responsibility can be identified with the grammatical choice "I" in the role of agent. In this last proposition the student's main feeling can also be located in the lexical choice of the three dots. In this case, we can assume that the student was somehow obliged to accept this situation and live with it. The choice of punctuation instead of a clear statement of dislike of this situation revealed the student's voice that struggles to be heard and express these feelings.

Excerpt 6.

For sure it is better to have a problematic distance education rather than no education at all (Maria St7 12 years old)

The acceptance of this situation as normality can be identified from another point of view in another student, who compared the "problematic distance education" with "no education". This case is different from the previous one in the sense that in this case the student recognized the value of distance education. This value was diminished when it was compared with no education at all, showing that distance education cannot be the first choice and it is actually better than nothing.

Silence As a Value in Online Education – A Marginalized Perspective

Although in this thematic category the change of the students' role is presented, the TR has chosen representative excerpts that reflect the approaches the students have. In this case, a marginalized case expressed only by one student is presented.

Excerpt 7.

Missing some minutes of the class due to technical issues or because of the mobile's low battery or spending time trying to enter the class, makes you understand nothing (…) To sum up I prefer online education because it is not so noisy as it is in the classroom (Lefteris St16 – 12 years old)

Lefteris's approach is interesting because this was the only case where the student, although realizing the difficulties and the problems of online education like "low battery" and some students' behavior like being late, also argued that this kind of education was better, because "it is not so noisy". Silence and being able to listen to the teacher were considered significant by the student. At the same time, the student neglected the fact that silence was not always positive. The students might be present on a platform, but this does not necessarily mean that they are active.

The Changes in The Teacher's Role

In the classroom various discussions took place concerning the changes in the teacher's role and the difficulties they faced, as well as the role that they should have in online education.

The Lack of Humor

From excerpt (8), it seems that one of the main actions connected with online distance education is the change in the teachers' behavior and practices.

Excerpt **8.**

> *Since we started online lessons, most of the teachers have changed their behavior. Many of them have stopped being relaxed, not in the sense that we were laughing all the time in the classroom, but in the sense that during lessons we were telling jokes that arose during the lesson. Furthermore, many of them are not familiar with this kind of learning and as a result they are more cautious* (Athena St1 – 12 years old)

The main change identified by Athena was that the teachers 'stopped being relaxed'. Online education stopped this action along with 'telling a joke'. Athena clarified that being relaxed does not mean that there was no learning, but there was somehow more interaction and a more relaxed teaching procedure. It seems that some practices were more connected with live education, and that some human practices like laughing and telling a joke were stopped by the machines, the cables and the online platforms. Another reason which can be identified in the next proposition is the teachers' unfamiliarity with the new tools.

Problems with Online Education

Athena in excerpt (8) definitely represented the teachers as more cautious because of their lack of technological knowledge. In (9) she continued her account by referring to the problems the teachers faced.

Excerpt **9.**

> *Despite all of this, I believe that not only the students but also the teachers have problems with this kind of education. For example, some might live in areas where there is no good internet connection and as a result they cannot do the course. What is more, many have never worked in this way and therefore there are many problems with the specific kind of education* (Athena St1 – 12 years old)

In (9) Athena recognized that the teachers also faced problems during the online distance education that took place in the first wave of the pandemic in Greece. The problems that were identified by the students are "areas where there is no good internet connection". Regarding Crete, and especially the region of Rethimno, it is important to mention that there are indeed poor internet connections in more mountainous areas where many students and some teachers live. It is significant that this factor was also mentioned by the students. Although the problems were identified, the students did not consider the reasons why this was happening and which solutions (e.g. teacher training, provision of electronic devices) could be found to overcome these problems.

The Teacher's Role Beyond Technological Knowledge

Beyond the recognition of the problems that the teacher faced during the first wave of the pandemic, there were also cases where students attributed characteristics to the teacher that are not attributed to technological issues.

> *For sure many hadn't the necessary knowledge, the previous experience, and not even the technical means to cope with this procedure and to adapt their teaching from the real classroom to the virtual. (…). What was more important, I believe, was the fact that the teachers were more interested in preserving the communication with the students and to help them in their learning and support them psychologically. For sure, distance education offers a lot to all of us, but in any case cannot substitute real classroom learning* (Georgia St8 – 12 years old)

After referring to the problems and the teachers' difficulties (For sure…virtual), Georgia in (10) says that it was more important for the teacher (What was more important) to preserve communication, help the students and support them psychologically. The voice of the student was also strongly present since it was expressed with the first-person singular "I" and the verb "believe", which belongs to the mental verbs. The student here became the "Senser" who was present in the situation. According to the student, in addition to the technological skills needed to design online courses, there were more important skills for a successful teacher connected with humanity, feelings and support. Learning during the COVID19 pandemic was not the most important job for the teacher, according to the student. Psychological support played an important role when students were confined in their houses.

Beyond these two skills that were mentioned by Georgia, Yiannis in excerpt (11) also compared online learning with classroom education and argued that there were also other important practices connected with the teacher, such as exchanging ideas, instant help and offering knowledge.

Excerpt **11.**

> *In contrast with classroom education, the role of the teacher is more basic in stuff such as immediate communication, exchanging ideas, instant help and offering knowledge* (Yiannis St2 – 12 years old)

In (11) the teacher was not connected with technological skills, nor with the knowledge of ICT. Another problem that the teacher had to face was the inequalities issues that arose.

Excerpt **12.**

> *(…) but the most difficult, I think, is that when they cannot have contact with another student because the student doesn't have the means for online education* (Nikoleta St9 – 12 years old)

According to Nikoleta St9, the "most difficult" situation for the teacher is dealing with the students with no financial means. This difficulty is evaluated as important due to grammatical choices (most – superlative form). In this case, Nikoleta identified inequality issues and connected these issues with the teacher, showing that the teacher is unable s to provide education to these marginalized students.

In this excerpt it is not obvious whether Nikoleta neglects the political factors that could enhance online teaching and learning, or she understood that and identified that the only person who faced the problem was the teacher, who was unable to help . From (12) it could be acknowledged that the students underlined a problematic situation and a teacher who cannot provide a solution.

Online Education Allows Time for Questions

In the data there was another single case that was different from the others, since the students stated that the teachers were calmer and gave opportunities for more questions.

> *The teachers in online distance education are calmer, as well as us (the students) and since there are moments when you can ask something, and they tell you the answer immediately. In the school they used to answer you during the break* (Emmanuella St5 – 12 years old)

In excerpt 13, Emmanuella differs from the other students and recognizes that the teacher provides more opportunities for questions. This excerpt was important since the student realized that the same time for questions is not taken for granted in the real classroom lesson. Nevertheless, it is another case that favored individualistic approaches to learning and neglected the higher communication that most students recognized in real classrooms.

What the Teacher Must Do?

In the last thematic unit, the students reflected upon the role of the teacher. Although the discussion was on the new technologies and the problems students and teachers faced during the online distance education that took place during the pandemic, the students changed the discussion theme to the general role of the teacher.

Excerpt **14.**

> *The teacher must help children to discover their talents and to give them knowledge that will be useful for the future. Furthermore, the teacher's character and the way of thinking the teacher will promote in the classroom are very important, so that each student can elaborate their own way of thinking* (Evgenia St20 – 12 years old)

Evgenia in (14) started with a strong opinion with the deontic modal verb 'must' and the first action that was connected with the teacher was "help to discover." In the next proposition certain characteristics are attributed to the teacher: "character" and "way of thinking." These traits are important, according to the students, and had a great impact on the students since these characteristics "can elaborate" the students to develop their own way of thinking. There was no reference to technological skills, or to knowledge of complicated platforms.

Another student, Yiannis St2, also referred to other traits of the teacher and he also neglected to refer to any technological skills the teacher should develop or have.

Excerpt **15.**

> *The teacher should promote collaboration with classmates, put them in groups for assignments, and generally help the students with difficulties. Furthermore, to talk to us about various things, have fun and make us feel better and not get bored. We had to stay away from school to understand that these were the things we were missing* (Yiannis St2 – 12 years old)

In this excerpt, Yiannis used almost the same grammatical features (modality, teacher as agent) as the previous students and added some more traits to the teacher such as: the promotion of collaboration, putting students in groups, assistance to students with difficulties, talking about extracurricular themes, making students feel better and not getting bored. The most important proposition is the ending of his paragraph where he actually reflected as a collective entity (we), and by using the mental verb "understand" showed that this collective entity gained the "phenomenon" (according to Halliday): "the things we were missing". All these actions the teacher should do are actually the important things that the students evaluated as crucial for teaching and learning.

Apart from the case where the technological skills that the teacher should have had were missing, another student reflected deeper and constructed a representation of learning by separating the material and non-material elements.

Excerpt **16.**

> *In conclusion, we would say that the whole education system is a living organism. Its goal is not only the offering of knowledge. The classroom is not simply four walls with desks and chairs, but a relationship based on confidence, a community, a living organism. The online classrooms that are located hundreds or millions of kilometres away are connected through contemporary technology in a virtual reality and therefore they cannot express the feelings of the participants* (Paschalis St6 – 12 years old)

This excerpt is very important since the student represented the classroom and learning through a comparison between online and offline education. Online education is characterized by remoteness and a space where feelings cannot be expressed. On the other hand, offline education was characterized as a "living organism" that can lead learning beyond the offering of knowledge. Offline education had nothing to do with materiality such as the "four walls", the "desks", the "chairs", but rather with non-material elements such as human relationships, community and feelings. The student repeated several times in this excerpt his main idea and represented offline education as a "living organism."

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Promoting Students' Voice in School Settings

In this action research, with the students as co-researchers, the TR investigated the teaching and learning discourses that emerged from the online education during the first wave of the Covid19 pandemic in Europe (March-May 2020) in the region of Crete, Greece. This research gave voice to the students and through the analysis significant findings were identified.

In online distance learning it is important to identify the students' needs and the necessary support as well as to identify the suitable learning theories to train qualitive instructors (Akbaba Altun & Bulut, 2021: 26). In this discussion the students' voices have been neglected. Researchers have conducted research upon the notion of voice in the Covid 19 pandemic mainly in universities (Kong et al., 2022; Vaz, 2022)or with a community of practices (To et al., 2022).

Action research can also identify problems that arise during online distance education such as the amount of (home)work the teachers were giving to the students. This finding was also confirmed by another research in Finland (Niemi & Kousa, 2020, p.16). The teachers were unconsciously parts of a game played during the pandemic, where a lot of unpaid work took place in the afternoons or at the weekends. Their houses became the new workplaces and their families had to tolerate this situation (Selwyn & Jandric, 2020, p. 992).

Action research is an epistemology that enhances the voices of the ones that are being neglected (Fine, 2018). To identify the students' needs and empower their voice there is the need to adopt an approach and cultivate a democratic culture. This research showed that action research is this approach and schools can benefit from the students' voice (Flutter & Rudduck, 2004).

Action research provides the opportunity to all the students and all their perspectives can be expressed and accepted. For instance, for some students there were benefits from online education, such as silence and having the opportunity to ask questions. This finding is peripheral since it is mentioned by only one student. Most of the students preferred the exchange of ideas and the instant question-answer that take place in real classrooms. The same finding was also confirmed in a study which took place in Finland, where the students also lost their motivation, and missed contact with classmates and having fun (Niemi & Kousa, 2020, p. 9, 17).

Learning in Online Distance Education

This research, as well as other limited investigations on the students' voice, showed that constructionism and participation are important factors for the students' learning through online distance education (Squire, 2022).

In this research the students provided unique insights regarding the changes in the role of the students and the teacher in online educational practices. Furthermore, they supported the view that online education is not considered by the students as important as it is by private companies in Silicon Valley (Selwyn & Jandric, 2020) . Students focused on communication, expression of feelings and a sense of belonging. These take place only in real classrooms.

Students' discourses can contribute significantly to the discussion regarding the benefits and the disadvantages of online education, its implication for student-teacher relationships and for learning in general. Students' perspectives are also aligned with directors' perspectives since both of them acknowledge that it is important to determine students' needs as well as transferring knowledge and skills through online and offline communication (Akbaba Altun & Bulut, 2021, p. 27).

Issues of Power – Barriers to Online Distance Communication

The research showed that the students are capable of recognizing issues of inequality such as the barriers that the students and their families confronted in Covid 19 online distance education. This problem was identified by different scholars across the globe during the pandemic and before (Demir Kaymak & Horzum, 2022; Van & Thi, 2021; Rizvi et al., 2019).

This research showed that action research can offer the students' insights in the discussion about issues of access and inequalities. For instance, in this research the students noticed that there are different social groups in a single classroom; the ones that have access to digital tools and the ones who do not. The students also recognized that the teacher is the one that must deal with this problem. The same problem has also been noticed by other researchers; for instance, in Morocco(Abioui, et al., 2020) and in Portugal(Assuncao Flores & Gago, 2020). Additionally, Critical Discourse Analysis allows researchers to identify the power issues and the discourses the students reproduce.

Teachers' Education in Online Distance Education in the Post-Covid Period

In the Covid19 period more than 1.2 billion children were out of the classrooms, thus changing education for ever (Li Cathy and Lalani Farah, 2020). This fact poses new issues for instructors and experts, who should reconsider the students' characteristics when redesigning the learning environments and reorganizing students' education(Ates-Cobanoglu & Cobanoglu, 2021; Bovermann et al., 2018).

As was shown by this research, the students have to offer new insights. For instance, although researchers in online distance education are focusing on the digital skills and the platforms the teachers should know, the students also mentioned other non-technological characteristics such as the psychological support the teachers should provide, especially in hard times such as the Covid-19 pandemic. It is noticeable that the qualitative research approaches focused on the psychological support the students and the teacher need. Another research which was based on the teacher's narratives also showed that health and financial problems affected teachers and their teaching, especially in interacting and communicating with their students, as well as students' motivation (Akar & Erden, 2021).

Limitations, Implications and Future Research

This research is not without limitations, since it is a case study taking place in a single context. Nevertheless, it seems that action research with students as participants can shed more light on various educational issues such as online education. Students can contribute significantly to these discussions. Action research is limited to specific contexts and should be analyzed according to the context. This is not always negative. The contextual analyses and the knowledge of what is happening in different regions and why this is happening

can be beneficial not only for digital education but for education and social sciences in general. Should this research be continued, it could contribute more effectively and might even encourage the political activism that is needed to deal with the inequality and access issues that emerged in the classroom.

Based on the findings of the research the following implications could be taken into consideration in future studies:

- It will be beneficial for researchers in their studies in the field of teaching, especially when they are focusing on the students' voice
- The study examined the students' empowerment in online educational settings. This can be examined further in other settings and comparable studies can take place to shed light on the contextual factors that affect online education
- Researchers are recommended to conduct studies comparing the technology needed in educational settings, the students' skills and the teachers' training with regard to the online distance education in different school settings

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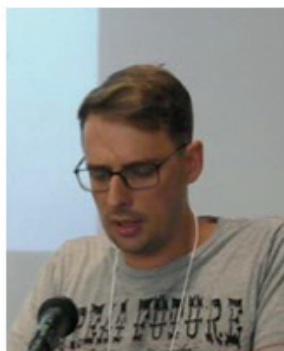
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