



DISTANCE THEATRE EDUCATION IN GREEK PRIMARY SCHOOL DURING COVID-19 THROUGH THE EYES OF THE THEATRE TEACHERS

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Abstract:

The suspension of school operations, which lasted for a long period of time to deal with the Covid-19 pandemic, posed significant challenges to educational institutions to continue their operations smoothly. This pilot research study explores the views and experiences of 50 theatre teachers on the implementation of distance learning in primary schools during the Covid-19 pandemic. In this research, an attempt was made to investigate the difficulties and obstacles that arose during the implementation of distance learning, as well as to record the challenges and opportunities for teaching the theatre course. The main objectives of the study were to explore the challenges of the role of theatre teachers and the difficulties they were faced with, the possibilities of their cooperation with the leadership of the school units, with their colleagues, as well as the communication with children and their families. A questionnaire was used as the main research tool for data collection, which was designed and consisted of Likert scale questions. Some of the main findings were the lack of preparation of teachers in the implementation of distance learning, technical barriers, high levels of stress, and intense concern in the digital classroom. Also, the challenges and difficulties of the students in attending the distance learning of the theatre education were mentioned, as well as the involvement of the parents in the process. Finally, the findings regarding the support and attitude of the school leadership are commented.

Keywords: theatre education, distance education, teachers' views, primary school

1. Introduction

The suspension of school operations, which lasted for a long period of time to deal with the Covid-19 pandemic, posed significant challenges to educational institutions to

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continue their operations smoothly (Bakirtzi, 2020). In this context, distance education was utilized to continue the educational process at all levels of education (Karalis & Raikou, 2020). It is also observed that, as the teachers were asked to operate in a completely different context in a very short period of time, questions were raised regarding their readiness and skills to handle digital technologies, the adequacy, and suitability of the technological equipment they had, the digital course design skills to meet the demands of distance education, as well as the possibilities of active student engagement (Dhawan, 2020; Reimers, Schleicher, Saavedra, & Tuominen, 2020).

Many studies have highlighted the contribution of various types of art to the effectiveness of the learning process and to the improvement of school performance of students (Prins, 2008), to the development of communication and expressive skills (Hui & Lau, 2006), as well as to creativity (Kouretzis, 1991) giving them the possibility to know themselves better. However, within this general context of challenges and changes due to the pandemic, art education courses taught in primary school, such as music, visual arts, and theater education, were significantly affected.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in Education and Theatre Education

With the term ICT in Education, we mean the integration and systematic use of digital technologies in the educational process, with the aim of improving the quality of learning experiences and achieving a higher level of learning outcomes (Dimitriadis, 2015).

With reference to the teaching of the Theatre, the inclusion of digital media comes to highlight the basic characteristics of drama in education, as these are summarized in interaction, cooperation, teamwork, the cultivation of imagination, and learning through experiential experiences (Fanouraki, 2016). With regard to the interdisciplinary nature of the subjects of Theatre Education and ICT, the integration of digital technologies in Theatre Education contributes to the expansion of thematic areas and visual media, promotes the knowledge, abilities, and skills of students in handling technology for the theater (e.g. from the use of the internet to the use complex digital applications and programs) and finally facilitates and enriches the production processes, such as the creation of a play, etc. Specifically, its applications of Theatre Education with the use of digital media focus on making students digitally literate through active, interactive, and multimodal theater and drama techniques (Fanouraki, 2016).

2.2. Use of Distance Education during the Pandemic and the New Challenges

In the unprecedented, extraordinary conditions due to a pandemic that we experienced in the spring of 2020, distance education was the most convenient tool for students to maintain their contact with the educational process (Kioulanis, 2020). In particular, the distance education carried out in Greece during the 2020-2021 school year, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, was structured in three main elements, in synchronous and

asynchronous teaching and through educational broadcasting. At the same time, digital tools and interactive textbooks were available from the digital school (<http://ebooks.edu.gr/ebooks/>) and each educational unit had the possibility to shape the distance education program by combining these three training methods (Raikou et al., 2021).

Nevertheless, the new teaching conditions and the challenges of distance education - synchronous and asynchronous - were unknown both to the teachers and to the students and their families, and therefore it was expected that many problems and difficulties would arise. In particular, the teachers had to respond immediately to the new teaching conditions and methodologies, which they did not know at a pedagogical and methodological level. In addition, there were major deficiencies in technological equipment, many networks connection issues, difficulties in finding suitable online and teaching materials, a lack of digital skills, as well as more general skills related to distance education such as autonomy, self-regulation, communication skills, etc. (Evangelou, 2021; Lionarakis et al., 2021; Rammos & Bratitsis, 2020).

Even if teachers have adequate technological skills (Sachteas & Sachteas, 2020), distance education may be inadequate for certain age groups, grade levels, subjects, and students. In addition, pedagogical methods and strategies in distance education must be different from those used in the classroom. Teachers are called to face a much more intense workload, demands, and expectations from students and parents (Georgoulakou & Kostas, 2022).

Additionally, in Nikiforos, Tzanavaris, and Kermanidis' survey (2020) of 1120 primary and secondary school teachers, it was found that 56.6% of the teachers stated that they had no or minimal experience in distance education. As the researchers report, the lack of experience may very well have been the main source of problems and difficulties in the transition to distance learning.

Similarly, many relevant researches (Mouzakis, Koutromanos, & Tsoli, 2021; Nikolaidou & Kostas, 2021; Papazoglou, Kostas, & Sofos, 2021; Paraschou, Kritikos, & Kostas, 2021; Chrysostomou, 2020) in school education confirm the above problems, adding the difficulties of social interaction, as well as the technical factors of operating distance learning systems. Finally, it is important to mention that during the review of the literature, there does not seem to be any other relevant research to investigate the opinions of theatre teachers. Focusing specifically on the teaching of art education courses, we know that Theatre Education can be a basic teaching subject of distance education (Trivyriadakis, 2013).

3. Material and Methods

3.1. Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this research was to investigate the views and experiences of theatre teachers regarding the implementation of distance teaching of the Theatre Education

course in primary schools during the Covid-19 pandemic. The main research questions are summarized as follows:

- How do theatre teachers evaluate their professional experience during the pandemic?
- What possible difficulties did the students face while attending the Theatre Education course remotely?
- What obstacles arose during the cooperation of teachers and parents during the implementation of distance education?
- What was the attitude of the school leadership during the implementation of distance school education?

3.2. Sample

The survey involved 50 primary theatre teachers, who implemented distance teaching during the Covid-19 pandemic, during the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 school years. Of these, 42 teachers were women and 8 were men. The selection of the sample does not belong to any category, as the sampling was based on access to online teacher websites, as well as through acquaintances. It is therefore a convenience sampling and is not representative of the entire population.

3.3. Data Collection

The research study was carried out from 1/03/2022 to 31/05/2022 through the questionnaire distributed electronically. The questionnaire consists of closed-ended questions expressed on a five-point Likert scale (1=Not at all – 2=A little – 3=Moderate – 4=A lot – 5=Very much). It was designed in such a way as to cover a multitude of issues related to the views of theatre teachers on the distance teaching of the Theatre Education course in primary schools during the Covid-19 pandemic. Specifically, it consists of two main parts, the first part, which contains the general-demographic data, and the second part, which contains the main questions, about the evaluation of the professional experience of theatre teachers during distance education, the possible challenges faced by students and the cooperation of teachers and parents during the use of distance education.

4. Results

Initially, as it emerged from the descriptive analysis of the data related to demographics and general information, most of the sample was female, aged 31-50 years. 60% of the sample had a master's degree and additional training in Theatre Pedagogy, Special Education, and Psychology. However, only 36% of the sample had additional training in ICT. 72% of the sample were substituted with 48% having 11-20 years of teaching experience. Also, all respondents stated that they mainly used the synchronous education platform Cisco Webex for the online courses, as there was a relevant license from the Ministry of Education and Religion. 74% of the sample reported that they mainly used E-

me as a means of asynchronous communication. 78% of the sample reported that they used a personal laptop for distance learning and 80% of the sample used both asynchronous and synchronous distance learning.

The table below presents the responses of the teachers to the statements based on their degree of agreement regarding their preparation and their professional behavior during the implementation of distance education.

Table 1: Frequency distribution of sample teachers in terms of preparation and professional behavior when implementing distance education

	1 (Not at all)	2 (A little)	3 (Moderate)	4 (A lot)	5 (Very much)
Adequately prepared to offer distance learning during the pandemic period	18	13	10	7	2
Adequately prepared to convert traditional material into digital material for distance learning	9	21	16	2	2
Adequately prepared to use digitized material available from the internet and related educational resources	5	21	12	10	2
Adequately prepared to use digital platforms (e.g., E-me, Cisco Webex, Skype, Viber) as a means for distance learning	18	12	11	6	3
Sufficiently qualified for distance teaching, after attending a training program or seminar in distance education	8	11	18	12	1
Satisfied with professional experience during distance learning	2	14	18	12	4
Difficulty in communication and cooperation with colleagues	6	18	13	12	1
Development of interdisciplinary approaches	17	18	7	5	3
Increase in workload and preparation	2	0	7	7	34
Difficulty coordinating and organizing material so that it is understandable and attractive.	8	8	19	9	6

According to the data, 38 (76%) of the respondents stated that they encountered a frequent problem with the network when implementing distance courses with their students, 42 (84%) reported problematic acoustics during teaching, 37 (74%) problematic imaging during teaching, one person (2%) reported less lesson time, and 3 people (6%) reported no technical problem.

Moreover, 15 (30%) of the respondents considered teaching from their private space a positive element in distance education, 4 (8%) considered flexible lesson time a positive element, as well as more time for preparation at home, 32 (64%) the use of digital resources for teaching scenarios and the digital library, 18 (36%) the use of interactive-multimedia material, 41 (82%) the additional knowledge gained from the use of platforms and other digital applications and tools and 25 (50%) the development of peer-to-peer support networks.

Additionally, 5 (10%) of the respondents felt a sense of satisfaction during distance learning, 6 (12%) felt a sense of determination and effectiveness, 29 (58%) felt a high-stress level, 20 (40%) an excessive feeling of psychological fatigue, 4 (8%) felt a lack of confidence in themselves, 20 (40%) a feeling of isolation from the rest of their colleagues, 21 (42%) felt intense anxiety in the digital classroom, 18 (36%) felt unable to help the students emotionally, 17 (34%) felt discomfort and embarrassment from the simultaneous presence of parents, and 5 (10%) felt a sense of competence and self-confidence.

4.1. Information on Distance Education - Students

The table below shows the teachers' responses to the statements based on their degree of agreement regarding the possible challenges they believe their students faced during distance learning.

Table 2: Frequency distribution of the teachers in the sample regarding the possible challenges they consider their students faced during distance learning

	1 (Not at all)	2 (A little)	3 (Moderate)	4 (A lot)	5 (Very much)
Lack of direct communication and contact with classmates	1	2	7	21	19
Lack of guidance to students regarding the use of digital technologies	2	4	13	23	8
Difficulty understanding the educational material provided	9	14	22	3	2
Difficulty using online platforms for courses	1	6	19	18	6
Reluctance to actively participate in the online educational process	6	6	15	17	6
Lack of technical support services from the school	2	1	8	21	18
Lack of proper equipment	1	2	3	27	17
Network and connectivity weaknesses	1	2	1	23	23
Lack of time for parents to support children at home	1	3	14	25	7
Long hours in front of a screen, difficulty concentrating and fatigue	0	0	5	21	24
Difficulty implementing experiential theater-pedagogical activities	3	1	6	17	23

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Individual activities in distance learning were more frequent than group-collaborative ones	2	3	2	15	28
Existence of appropriate interactive-supporting material for the Theatre Education course (Hyperlinks, videos, comprehension quizzes, evaluation quizzes, reflective activities)	2	7	26	10	5
In asynchronous education, the educational material, in addition to study text, also contained interactive activities	2	9	17	16	6
Lack of opportunities to develop students' creativity and critical thinking	3	6	14	7	20
The climate of the digital classroom encouraged equal participation, collaboration and communication	4	13	22	10	1
Implementation of virtual educational visits to art and culture centers (museums, theaters, cultural centers, libraries)	17	12	13	7	1
Emphasis was placed on the experiential, communicative, exploratory, and playful nature of the Theatre Education course	3	15	10	15	7
Lack of socialization and feeling lonely and isolated	2	3	11	25	9

4.2. Distance Education Information - Parents

The table below shows the teachers' responses to the statements based on their degree of agreement regarding the attitude of parents during distance teaching.

Table 3: Frequency distribution of the teachers of the sample regarding the attitude of parents during distance teaching

	1 (Not at all)	2 (A little)	3 (Moderate)	4 (A lot)	5 (Very much)
They supported the student technically	0	14	21	12	3
They guided and supported the student academically	2	14	21	12	1
They were absent	9	22	14	4	1
They were involved in a highly intrusive way	15	21	10	3	1
They caused stress to the student	14	23	9	4	0
They better understood the importance of Theatre Education	1	4	18	17	10

for the holistic development of the student (physical, emotional, cognitive, and social).					
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4.3. Information on Distance Education - Support & Attitude of School Leadership

The table below presents the responses of the teachers to the statements based on their degree of agreement regarding the attitude of the school leadership during distance teaching.

Table 4: Frequency distribution of the teachers of the sample regarding the attitude of the school leadership during distance teaching

	1 (Not at all)	2 (A little)	3 (Moderate)	4 (A lot)	5 (Very much)
It clearly defined the aims and objectives of the school unit	5	11	28	5	1
It was supportive to the teachers in difficulties that arose	2	6	25	13	4
It promoted cooperation between teachers, students, and parents	8	8	21	12	1
It gave theatre teachers opportunities to participate in decision-making	6	16	15	9	4
It took initiatives to procure suitable, equipment and connectivity	6	12	20	10	2
It promoted the development of collective and cooperative consciousness in the school community	3	10	30	7	0
It encouraged the development of the skills of theatre teachers and the implementation of innovative practices for distance teaching.	11	17	12	7	3

5. Discussion

In relation to the first research question regarding the evaluation of teachers' professional experience during distance education, the theatre teachers stated that they were not adequately prepared to offer distance teaching using digital platforms and applications (e.g. E-me, Cisco Webex, Skype, Viber) or convert traditional educational material into digital material for the needs of distance teaching, as recorded by other research (Evangelou, 2021; Lionarakis et al., 2021; Lake, 2020; Rammos & Bratitsis, 2020).

They also reported difficulties in using digitized material available from the internet and related educational resources. However, they stated that after attending a

relevant training program or seminar in distance education, they were moderately qualified for distance teaching.

Nevertheless, they point out difficulties in communication and cooperation with colleagues, but also in developing interdisciplinary approaches on their part. Important is the fact that they report an increase in workload and preparation, which is also proven by other research (Klouvatos, 2021), as well as difficulty in coordinating and organizing the material, so that it is understandable and attractive to the students.

In particular, the main challenges they faced related to the frequent problems with the home network and the connection during the implementation of the distance courses with their students, the problematic auditory and visual during the teaching, as well as the shorter duration of implementation of the lesson.

On the other hand, they considered teaching from their private space, flexible class time, as well as more time for preparation at home, and the use of digital resources for teaching scenarios and the digital library as positive elements in distance education, but also the use of interactive multimedia material. Most of the sample reported that key positive elements of the experience were the acquisition of additional knowledge from the use of platforms and other digital applications and tools, as well as the development of networks of mutual help and mutual support from colleagues.

Regarding the feelings they experienced, of the respondents, an extremely low percentage felt a sense of satisfaction during distance learning, a sense of determination and effectiveness, as well as a sense of competence and self-confidence. On the contrary, the majority reported that they felt a high level of stress, an excessive feeling of psychological fatigue, a feeling of isolation from other colleagues, a lack of confidence in themselves, intense anxiety in the digital classroom, an inability to help them emotionally students and often felt discomfort and embarrassment from the simultaneous presence of parents.

Regarding the second research question regarding the possible difficulties that the teachers consider that the students faced during the remote attendance of the Theatre Education course, the data showed that there was a significant lack of direct communication and contact with the classmates' lack of guidance of the students regarding the use of digital technologies, difficulty in understanding the provided educational material and using the electronic platforms for the courses, as well as reluctance to actively participate in the online educational process. The above findings also agree with other research studies at the national and international level (Al-Khatir Al-Arimi, 2014; Klouvatos, 2021; Kotsifakos, Logaras, & Rapti, 2021; Lionarakis et al., 2021; Phan & Dang 2017).

Also mentioned were significant problems of technical support from the school and lack of appropriate equipment, network and connectivity weaknesses, lack of time from parents to support children at home, long hours spent in front of a screen, as well as difficulty concentrating and fatigue.

Many teachers pointed out that they faced difficulty in implementing the experiential theater-pedagogical activities, choosing mainly individual activities and

occasionally suitable interactive-supportive material for the Theatre Education course. Additionally, virtual educational visits to art and culture centers were not implemented. Finally, they commented that the climate of the digital classroom did not encourage equal participation, cooperation, communication, and socialization of the children, while also no opportunities were given to develop the students' creativity and critical thinking.

Moving on to the third research question regarding the obstacles that arose during the cooperation of teachers and parents during the implementation of distance education, the teachers reported that parents moderately supported technically and guided moderately didactically their children during the educational process from home. Also, they were mostly present throughout the process and involved a bit in an intrusive way, but they caused stress to the student. The majority also reported that through this experience they better understood the importance of Theatre Education for the holistic development of the student (physical, emotional, cognitive, and social development).

Regarding the fourth research question that examines the attitude of the school leadership during the implementation of distance school education, the teachers reported that the director of the school unit was relatively supportive to the teachers in difficulties that arose and partially promoted cooperation between teachers, students, and parents. It also partially undertook some initiatives to procure suitable equipment and connectivity. The research study by Liakopoulou and Stavropoulou (2021) also agrees with this finding. Some efforts to develop collective and cooperative consciousness in the school community were also mentioned. Finally, it is worth emphasizing that the director did not systematically give the Theatre Studies students opportunities to participate in decision-making, while he encouraged the development of their skills and the application of innovative practices for distance teaching.

In the distance teaching of the Theatre Education course, the absence of games with the body, exercises of imagination, creativity, dramatization, improvisation, pantomime, interactive contact, and other experiential multi-sensory activities was particularly noticeable. Digital formats pose new challenges and, although they cannot replace live theatre, they may become additional features, taking advantage of new digital tools and capabilities. In the current juncture of the pandemic, so that theatre is not completely absent from schools, distance learning was only an emergency alternative, suitable exclusively for the emergency we were experiencing and not a solution. Possibly, some digital technology will be additional tools for Theatre Education in the future.

6. Conclusion

This pilot research is one of the first to study the problems of Theatre Studies in Greece regarding the implementation of urgent distance teaching during the pandemic. Although the study contributes to the enrichment of empirical data, its results must be evaluated with caution, since it was conducted on a small number of theatre teachers which was a sample of convenience and not representative to be able to draw generalized conclusions. In addition, it is important that this research took place two years after

distance teaching took place, which means that we would not have had the same answers a year ago, because the data were different. To also form a comprehensive picture and to capture the opinions of teachers more securely, it is necessary to follow a larger scale comparative research in a random sample with a mixed methodology and further inductive statistical analysis of the data.

In conclusion, distance education cannot replace teaching in the classroom environment. This teaching allows, due to the spatial and emotional proximity, to express the feeling and real communication in the body, just as it happens in Theatre Education. Nevertheless, properly prepared, and attractive interdisciplinary activities, utilizing digital technologies, can offer a substantial alternative pedagogical proposal, which can produce significant psycho-pedagogical results.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

About the Author

Damiani Vlachava studied Theatre (BA) at the Department of Theatre, Faculty of Fine Arts, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece. Her undergraduate courses specialize in applied drama in formal and non-formal education and are equally based on theatre education methodologies, on practices of contemporary performance. Her research focuses on the connections between performance and contemporary pedagogy, and on theatre as a form of social intervention.

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