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Remote Education in Kindergarten During the Pandemic in Teachers' Perception

Edukacja zdalna w przedszkolu w czasie pandemii w percepcji nauczycielek

Abstract: The subject of this interpretative research is knowledge about the planning, organisation and implementation of remote kindergarten education by kindergarten teachers of the Lubusz and Lower Silesian voivodeships using non-standardised interviews. The need for a sudden transition to remote education highlighted not only shortcomings in institutions preparing online classes, but also the low digital competences of kindergarten teachers, as well as children and their parents. The school managements did not present a position, but simply had talks with the teachers about how to implement remote preschool education. Teachers described how their remote work evolved, from simple transfer of materials, through texts read, experiments, theatres, or films. They pointed out the lack of ability to work remotely, spending more time (than in ordinary work) at the expense of their private life. For teachers, the problem was also the lack of interaction with children. Some of the parents even disregarded cooperation with the teacher at the expense of their children. Generally speaking, teachers had a negative attitude towards remote preschool education.

Keywords: teacher; preschool education; remote education; pandemic

Abstrakt: Przedmiotem badań o charakterze interpretatywnym uczyniono wiedzę o planowaniu, organizacji i realizacji zdalnej edukacji przedszkolnej przez nauczycielki przedszkoli z województwa lubuskiego i dolnośląskiego z wykorzystaniem niestandaryzowanych wywiadów. Konieczność nagłego przejścia jedynie na tryb edukacji zdalnej uwidoczniła nie tylko braki w przygotowaniu instytucji do realizowania zajęć online, lecz także niskie kompetencje cyfrowe nauczycielek przedszkoli oraz dzieci i ich rodziców. Dyrekcje nie miały swojego stanowiska, prowadziły z nauczycielkami rozmowy o sposobie realizacji zdalnej edukacji przedszkolnej. Nauczycielki opowiedziały, jak ewoluowała ich praca zdalna, tzn. od prostego przesyłania materiałów, poprzez czytane teksty, eksperymenty, teatrzyki, filmy. Ponadto zwróciły uwagę na brak umiejętności pracy zdalnej oraz poświęcanie na pracę większej ilości czasu (niż przy zwyklej pracy), często kosztem swojego życia przywatnego. Dla nauczycielek problemem był też brak interakcji z dziećmi. Niektórzy rodzice wręcz lekceważyli współpracę z nauczycielem kosztem swoich dzieci. Uogólniając, można powiedzieć, że nauczycielki miały negatywny stosunek do zdalnej edukacji przedszkolnej.

Słowa kluczowe: nauczyciel; wychowanie przedszkolne; edukacja zdalna; pandemia

REMOTE LEARNING CAUSED BY THE PANDEMIC – AN INTRODUCTION

On 12 March 2019, the Minister of National Education announced the closing of educational institutions due to the threat of the coronavirus. For the first two days, care and educational activities were still carried, but educational and specialised activities were suspended. Initially, it was assumed that the educational institutions would be closed for two weeks. A moment later, educational institutions at every level switched to online learning. At that time, teachers undertook various remote activities adequate for educational purposes.

Kindergartens and other establishments moved to home conditions. Every person, regardless of age, gender and role, had to grapple with new circumstances, accompanied by fear for their own and loved ones' health. The introduction of drastic changes has often taken place with great difficulty. Preschool education (as well as any other level of education) lacked time and ideas to develop tools adequate for functioning in the virtual world. Teachers, parents and even students started looking for new solutions.

The SARS-CoV-2 crisis is one of many, directly or indirectly affecting kinder-gartens and schools (of every level of education), and related individuals. For most teachers of the older generation, the transition to remote learning as a basic form was a surprise and a trauma, while for younger teachers – a new experience and a challenge to be met. Online education has brought about many changes in the methodology of work at every level of education. The introduction of this form of teaching took place suddenly, teachers acted intuitively, because they had no opportunity to plan and test remote and alternative teaching methods. They also did not have previous experience in the work of a remotely-conducted kindergarten.

OUTLINE OF THE RESEARCH PROCESS

In social life, there are many different individual teacher theories regarding remote learning and a lot of discourses and interpretations of professional practice, therefore, preschool education should not be compared only with the perception of it. First of all – in my humble opinion – we should focus on statements of kindergarten teachers who organise and participate in the process of preschool education. Recognising the individual views of kindergarten teachers regarding their functioning in a sudden change (caused by a pandemic) can be carried out from different perspectives, for example, looking for manifestations of engagement behaviours, doing something new or lacking any interest.

The presented research is located on the basis of an interpretive approach that allows to perceive the subjectivity of the adopted meanings. The subject of this

research is knowledge about the planning, organisation and implementation of remote kindergarten education by kindergarten teachers of the Lubusz and Lower Silesian voivodeships. The data are obtained from the statements of 40 kindergarten teachers during non-standardised interviews, which allow to extract the subjective significance of educational events and processes (cf. Krzychała, 2010; Kubinowski, 2010).

The selection of the group was deliberate, taking into account the kindergarten work experience in the range of 5–15 years, i.e. they were teachers with the professional promotion of trainee, appointed and certified. The interviews included several parts: the first – introductory, focused on the group (with which they work every day) and the teacher's workplace; the second (essential) focused on possible recommendations of the directorate, description of preparation for remote work, its implementation and problems of teachers' functioning in the pandemic.

It was assumed that the ways of defining the changes in preschool education caused by the pandemic, indicating the tasks carried out at that time, the meanings given to them – and recognised in the words by which they are described – reveal the intended and unintended ways of functioning of teachers in a sudden change. The undertaken research will not be analysed evaluatively, because its point is not to assess what in the discourse is good and bad, true or false, or even desirable or unnecessary.

MEANINGS GIVEN BY KINDERGARTEN TEACHERS DURING A PANDEMIC – OWN RESEARCH

In order to determine the fields of action amid the change, it was attempted to extract from the teachers' statements their descriptions of changes in professional work caused by the pandemic which were important for preschool education. The changes in preschool education caused by the pandemic defined by the teachers are focused here on several fields of action, i.e. recommendations of the management, description of preparation for remote work, its implementation, possible problems and successes. Activities chosen by teachers during the pandemic, meanings assigned to them, which were recognised in the words they described, show intentionally selected (or not) strategies of their actions in the middle of a sudden change.

The first field that the teachers paid attention to were the **decisions of the preschool management**. Multiple (i.e. 20, 50%) of teachers showed that the management did not have a concrete position, conducted talks with teachers and on this basis gave recommendations for the implementation of remote preschool education. An example is the statement of teacher No. 1 (10 years of work, n. appoint-

ed): "At the pedagogical council, the director informed us about the transition to remote work. During the conversation, we tried to jointly determine in what form to take contact with children and parents, and how to implement the curriculum. Since previously each group had an account on Facebook, where parents had the opportunity to look at working with children through photo reports, a decision was made to continue this type of transfer of tasks for preschoolers". According to teacher No. 2 (12 years of work, n. appointed), "the management required more dedication. She understood the difficulties encountered along the way". However, 10 (i.e. 25%) of kindergarten teachers drew attention to the requirements of the management and the misunderstanding of the problem, e.g. teacher No. 3 (12 years of work, n. appointed) says as follows: "The management required the establishment of a group for remote learning and sending tasks to the group". The statements of the other teachers were of a similar narrative. Some of them (15, i.e. 37.5%) pointed out that the management did not prepare them for remote work: "The lockdown was introduced and the director did not offer us any training, nothing. All we did was according to her requirements (Facebook, scenarios, photos, experiments), but in these activities (if I couldn't do something) my sons would help me" (teacher No. 9). Here, the respondents, commenting on the legitimacy of preparing and conducting remote classes, clearly indicated the feeling of coercion without specific help and understanding. They were aware that the goal set for them was undoubtedly important, but there was also a lack of consistency in the level and forms of activity offered to the child regardless of age.

The language of the teachers' statements also revealed **motives** which prompted them act in a certain way after an unexpected, rapid change. It turned out that when looking for justification for their own professional activity during the pandemic, they did not refer to any group standards adopted in the kindergarten. Only two respondents drew attention to the importance of conversations with other teachers. However, two threads were extensively developed. The first one concerned the collection of information on what new action needs to be taken from the internal regulations available in the kindergarten; arrangements developed together with the director and the pedagogical council. As a second source of regulation of practical action, they pointed to external regulations, the author of which was, for example, the Superintendent of Schools Office. The only document prepared by the ministry, and mentioned by the teachers as important, was the core curriculum, as expressed in teacher No. 7's statement: "I followed the core curriculum, it makes me certain that I did not miss anything". The ways the respondents argued the selected activities may mean that they did not see eye to eye with other kindergarten teachers. They have shown confidence in the institution, which guarantees the rightness of the decisions taken. Such a transfer of responsibility relieves them of the need for reflection and criticism. Despite the fact that courts are individual

and subjective, they are expressed in the context of institutions, thanks to which they create specific group norms, which can become a set of beliefs about their own team, their kindergarten, i.e. a set of courts defining a group (Crisp, Turner, 2009). Individual beliefs do not have to be the same as group beliefs which assume what teachers can and cannot do on the premises of the kindergarten. This may contribute to the fact that teachers may feel incompetent in changing their own professional practice. Therefore, they place complete trust in the directorate, the legislator, the institution, assuming that it is the guarantor of a successful change, at the same time, releasing themselves from responsibility in a given area.

Preparing for online classes turned out to be problematic for kindergarten teachers. During the interview, 23 (57.5%) teachers explained how remote work evolved. From simple transfer of materials, through experiments, read texts to theatres, which is expressed in the words of teacher No. 4: "In the initial phase, remote work consisted in transferring tasks for children, work cards, text to read to children, poems, fairy tales, ready videos from YouTube. According to the recommendations of the management, we had to rethink and use other forms of communication, e.g. the introduction of the experiment method. I planted cress and photographed its germination process. I also encouraged children to plant it and upload photos from time to time. I noticed the interest of children and parents through numerous photos, ready-made tasks and works. I wrote a comment under each submitted photograph, which clearly pleased the children and influenced the positive attitude towards this form of working with children. The greetings I received from the children encouraged me to be more creative. I decided to record videos, initially it was reading fairy tales on camera with prepared illustrations. In each recording there was a task, e.g. answer the questions, draw an illustration for the fairy tale, tell it. Over time, this method was no longer enough for me. I asked for help in recording fairy tales I played. First, it was a presentation with illustrations and a voice recording. Then, videos with props and puppets. Other times, I used some help to record classes, e.g. when introducing a new letter. I also invited the children to play with glove puppets, which were used to present the new letter. Children also made glove puppets on the basis of the model I sent them. I also recorded the experiments. I noticed the considerable interest of parents who proudly presented children's works. They also sent comments informing me that the children were asking to check if I had sent any messages, any new tasks. I was also told that the children answered questions from my recordings out loud. The classes were held twice a day at fixed times". On the other hand, teacher No. 4 (6 years of work, contracted) said: "Like our entire kindergarten, I initially only focused on the e-mail established at the beginning of the year for parents. I admit that I would only send partial information, some propositions of children's play. Then each of our kindergarten groups created their own Facebook

group and there the contact was a bit better, I would publish general, short scenarios that parents could carry out at home, I usually attached some descriptions/ pictures, etc., in order to interest them. Usually, it ended with parents putting likes or some comments under my posts, or them greeting me. And that was all. Then, because the isolation was still prolonging, the director said that we should use our online grade book and place our tasks, messages there... For a long time, even before the pandemic, but actually not much before it, our kindergarten had implemented an electronic Livekid grade book, that's an application. And there were standard options: attendance list, parents could mark the planned absence of their child, pay the bills related to the kindergarten, write a message, contact us in some way, see the menu, and we in turn could insert some announcements or general news. We use it every day. Then, during the isolation, it was our main tool for conducting classes. And there, like on Facebook, my colleagues from kindergarten and I posted ready-made scenarios, such that parents could easily perform at home with their child. There were a lot of movement tasks, I sent specific instructions to parents on movement and play according to the rhymes they read, I introduced curiosities related to a given issue according to the guide, I attached illustrations, songs or videos from YouTube to play at home. I also always gave art work and asked parents to publish a photo of their child's work in the grade book gallery. I asked them to participate and share any comments they might have". Teacher No. 7 (9 years of work, n. appointed) claims that her work focused on: "1) searching for interesting materials in books and the Internet (e.g. on teacher services, on publishers' websites, a lot of materials is available on teacher groups on Facebook); 2) sending all these materials to parents, including numerous multimedia materials; 3) writing out propositions of games with detailed instructions, with materials available at home; 4) participating in various online trainings and webinars to get new ideas; 5) maintaining constant contact with parents; 6) I spent a lot of time recording and publishing my own educational videos for children, I also looked for those already published on YouTube, but children prefer to watch us; 7) I also scanned a lot of materials so that parents could print and work on it, but not everyone uses it". Teacher No. 8 (9 years of work, n. appointed) says: "I searched for interesting websites, game propositions, read blogs, and prepared computer teaching aids, multimedia presentations". Teacher No. 14 also noticed that "when the institution undertook remote teaching, examples of materials for exercising with children at home were published on the kindergarten website. For my group of 6-year-olds, for each day I developed one material which was divided into three parts. Children could perform it independently at home or with their parents, or connect to didactic educational classes (online) »under the supervision of a parent«. In addition to the kindergarten website, I also posted various propositions of games for parents on other portals such as Facebook or

Gmail. I conducted the didactic and educational classes with proper mental work hygiene of the children, taking into account their psychophysical capabilities. The maximum working time for children in front of the computer was 30 minutes per day. I was available for parents and their children during my working hours according to the weekly work plan. At that time, I sent a timetable for educational activities of children, I undertook consultations and conversations with parents by phone, Messenger, e-mail, Skype, Facebook. Other teachers (28, i.e. 70% of the respondents) believe that it is not possible to work remotely at the preschool stage, which was expressed in the words of teacher No. 17: "It is impossible to prepare for remote work with such small children. It is very hard to work remotely with 3-year-olds, because children imitate us, they are visual artists, they need closeness and contacts with their peers."

During the interview, it turned out that teachers **positively evaluated their** skills and competences of remote work which, in their opinion, were necessary to implement remote preschool activities. They believed that in terms of substantive competences, determined by the scope of their knowledge, they felt ready to adopt new rights and obligations, because, as one of the respondents put it (No. 36): "This new situation, the remote preschool education, did not really change anything. Kids don't change. The developmental features characteristic of preschool age remained the same, their knowledge, skills, needs at a given age are still the same, i.e. I still used the knowledge that I had". For many kindergarten teachers, especially those of an older generation, remote work was a surprise and a traumatic experience. Up to 30 (i.e. 75%) teachers pointed out the lack of remote work skills, which was expressed in the words of teacher No. 10: "I belong to the older generation, we did not have computer classes in high school, college and elementary school. I had to learn everything myself on the basis of trial and error (so did my colleagues). The management did not organise a training for us to run and operate the platforms". A smaller group – mainly younger teachers – treated remote work as an adventure and a challenge to be met. Another younger teacher, No. 15, explained: "I had no problems using any of the platforms, YouTube. I've been taking computer classes since the first grade of elementary school. Of course many things changed since then, but I keep up and manage it efficiently". Only 20% (i.e. 8) of the surveyed kindergarten teachers shared this opinion. Online education has brought many changes in the methodology of working with 3-6-year-olds. The introduction of this form of teaching took place suddenly, teachers did not have the opportunity to plan and test alternative methods, and therefore acted intuitively.

As many as 90% of teachers expressed having difficulties related to remote work. Some of them argued they had spent more time than usual at the expense of their private lives, as exemplified by teacher No. 31: "In order to make the

classes more attractive, I was forced to look for inspiration on the Internet. I did not always have the right materials (I live in the countryside and this is a significant hindrance). The implementation of appropriate assistance and teaching measures required a lot of additional time. Recording and editing was also an extra work. My hours at work have increased considerably at the expense of my private life. There have been a few parents who have negatively assessed our work, claiming that it only consists in sending activities that they perform instead of us. In usual conditions, the child would come home after 4 p.m. and then the contact with the pupil ends. In remote work, it still lasted". Other teachers (17%) underlined a different way of preparing for work: "First of all, we needed to prepare completely differently, look for something that can be pasted into the computer, something that will entertain children and teach them, but will also interest parents, because some of them did not even look at the things we published. In kindergarten, we always work in a group, and that is how we do most of the exercises. Remotely, everyone is locked in their own home. So I have to plan every exercise, write them down well so that it is understandable, and tell the parent to sit down, play and practice with the child. I often wonder how many of them actually work according to the games I have prepared, whether they read the information I wrote, or turn on the videos I share. But I am glad that I have more and more photographs of fulfilled tasks (teacher No. 26)". The basis of the relationship in remote education is, apart from communication competences, efficiency in using various IT tools and their appropriate selection, adequately to the technical capabilities of children and their parents. However, empathy and observations regarding other areas (not only didactic) are also important. A teacher building relationships with children in virtual space interacts with different means (Bowers, Kumar, 2017).

When analysing the bonds emerging in the remote space, it is impossible to ignore the aspect of communication, which in the borrowed form, i.e. without the physical presence of the teacher, deprives the participants of the possibility of using non-verbal signals that convey information about emotions, acceptance, etc. In real-time online meetings, the voice is distorted, while the face and facial expressions often remain invisible, hidden or changed by digital media (Hosler, Arend, 2013). A teacher performing didactic and educational tasks enters into **relationships with pupils** (and their families). They create conditions for children to build a sense of belonging to a group in a climate of acceptance, despite the fact that contact is remote. However, experiencing a sense of community is possible during direct interpersonal relations. In remote work, the process of identification with the group is difficult. In traditional education, children stay and interact directly with each other every day, talk and communicate non-verbally, which serves in getting to know each other, interacting with others. For these reasons,

remote education is treated as a threat to the team's relations and sense of community. Despite this, the teacher must strive to integrate children using the available IT tools. Without positive contacts, the readiness for education decreases (Poleszak, Pyżalski, 2020). Each kindergarten teacher believes that interpersonal ties are crucial in their work. Good relations between the teacher and the child are the basis of educational success. For 38 (95%) respondents, the problem was the lack of interaction with children, which was expressed, for example, by teacher No. 33: "First of all, the lack of direct contact with children, the lack of response from parents, the lack of this feedback on how the child performed the task, the artistic work, or the classes at home. And there are also Internet problems, with the connection or the hardware". Teacher No. 39 also talked about this matter: "I did not have direct contact with children, I did not see what their problem was and I was not able to assess their progress". As many as 25% of teachers pointed out the lack of interest on the parents' part, which was clearly underlined by two teachers. No. 4 said: "there was a lack of cooperation with some parents. They did not read the messages, and thus did not make the children perform the given exercises regularly, and No. 11 explained: "I did not have any particular difficulties. I was not satisfied with the parents' approach to remote learning. Many disregarded the activities and did nothing with the children". Others (35%) focused on the technical side of remote work, which is expressed by teacher No. 16: "The difficulties I encountered while conducting classes in remote form are primarily technical problems, poor Internet connections, server suspension, often problems with transferring larger files. Children were also more engaged when working in kindergarten than online. They were more involved, and it was a lot easier for me to explain something to them directly than through a computer. Also, there was no way perform work in a group".

It was difficult for teachers to respond positively to remote preschool education. For 40 interviews, only 6 teachers drew attention to the teacher's creativity and acquiring new skills, as expressed by teacher No. 19: "The profession of teacher requires creativity, quick response to the events and situations. The positive side of remote work is having additional skills such as recording movies, preparing presentations with background sound (reading or telling a text). Managing in a time with low access to teaching resources. In this case, I used what I had – spoons, forks, stones, twigs, clips, etc. I gained new experience and, most importantly, a closer contact with the children and their parents. I often looked at the website several times a day, waiting for a comment or a photo of the completed task. All this gave me joy and a sense of a well accomplished work. It is important that the mutual relations of educator-pupil give them the same joy". Seventeen (42%) teachers saw the possibility of resting from everyday work, e.g. teacher No. 38 says: "Initially, there was a thought that there would be a bit of slack, but given how much more

preparation there was to implement these classes, there was definitely not. Okay. There was a possibility to learn about new technologies, platforms or Internet portals, but contact and knowledge of the equipment will not replace contact with the child. In the long run it is burdensome, especially since these technologies are constantly changing and it is difficult to master them". There were also teachers (9, i.e. 22% of the interviewees), who in their speech focused only on the didactic sphere. "I went through all of the scheduled subjects. The parents of some children sent me back the results of their work, which I was very happy about. When it comes to remote work, I was not satisfied with anything" (teacher No. 40). For as many as 38 (i.e. 95%) teachers, interactions with children are important, which is expressed in the words of teacher No. 29: "I definitely prefer direct contact with children", and teacher No. 17: "I admit that it is hard to say. Remote work with preschoolers is such a big challenge and burden that it does not give satisfaction, as well as teacher No. 39: "Working remotely with children, I managed to encourage the group to act. Despite many difficulties, I am proud of myself that I managed to get it all together, organise the children, provide information and, at the same time, have a great time".

The interviews were concluded by provoking the teachers to comply to remote work in the kindergarten. As many as 33 (i.e. 82%) teachers, focused on their own much greater contribution of work and lack of contact with children – teacher No. 26's statement: "Despite greater effort and time spent on remote classes, despite other drawbacks, such as lack of contact with peers, relationships with children and their parents have grown stronger. In reality, I address each child individually during these classes, not collectively". Others (up to 29, i.e. 72%) focused on the effectiveness of education: "Remote work in kindergarten does not always bring results, and this is due to the lack of parental involvement" (teacher No. 19). In general, 90% of the teachers had a negative attitude towards remote preschool education, e.g. teacher No. 22 focuses on relationships with parents and says: "I believe that there should be no remote learning in kindergarten. This is because of the parents' neglectful approach to the matter". Others focus on the dangers of working at a computer, e.g. the statement of teacher No. 37: "My attitude towards remote work is negative. For many years, I have been conducting classes in a kindergarten and I cannot imagine such a form for a longer period. Children need contact with their peers. Remote classes not only negatively affects health by limiting physical activity, spoiling the eyesight, but also affects the psyche of children, because a small child needs contact with the environment. Each planned exercise has to develop the four areas of teaching: emotional, social, physical and cognitive which is difficult to achieve while working remotely, although the educators try their best".

CONCLUSIONS

The presented research shows the importance of building and maintaining direct interactions between the teacher, children and their parents. The teachers' actions show concern for good contacts with children. They undertook many activities in this area, including: selection of the appropriate form of communication, dialogue, systematic provision of feedback, sending class scenarios, photo reports, comments, etc. The need for a sudden transition to remote education highlighted not only shortcomings in institutions preparing online classes, but also the low digital competences of kindergarten teachers. Children and their parents also struggled with this new way of working. Some of the parents even disregarded cooperation with the teacher at the expense of their children. Although many people are familiar with the Internet, it stands as a second alternative. Within it, children and their parents establish and build friendships, maintain them, communicate using available and changing technologies (Czerski, 2012). It turned out that the competences of teachers, parents and their children in this area were not sufficient (Buchner et al., 2020). The transition to remote learning as a basic form for most teachers, especially the older generation, was surprising and difficult. The introduction of this form of education took place rapidly, the teachers acted intuitively, because they did not have the opportunity to educate themselves in this area, plan their work and test alternative methods. The respondents clearly paid attention to the importance of building relationships (mainly peer and teacher-child-parent relations). Organisational matters of kindergartens were also changed, i.e. employee relations, lack of training for teachers, cooperation with parents/carers and children. Some teachers, as well as children and their parents, benefited by learning interesting skills, gaining new competences. This period can also be an inspiration for the modernisation of many didactic and educational issues, which will adapt to new challenges faced by contemporary Polish education.

For a long time, the educational work of kindergarten teachers was not subject to any modification. Manners of action and recognised methods were becoming established. Pedagogical practice was based on methodological and organisational schemes. Teachers' responsibilities resulting from the pandemic were accepted as necessary, but also triggered initiatives in some of them. Moreover, in many kindergartens, the directorates did not have specific recommendations for work which were specified in discussion with the teachers. The presented reflections of the teachers show that many changes taking place in preschool education were unforeseen, and the teachers were not prepared for them. They can certainly be included in the "joyful kindergarten" category. Changes in preschool education were treated as external, causing that not all teachers engaged in them, because the change was imposed from superiors. On the other hand, those implemented

from the bottom up prompted teachers to shift responsibility, integrate, interiorise them. It is worth noting that, when resisting change, it is much harder to take action in its favour. Despite this, whether with more or less reluctance, the teachers still performed their professional duties. Teachers did not see the need for remote actions, they focused primarily on disadvantages, problems, difficulties. Having an extensive knowledge of the specifics of child development, methods, strategies of work and demonstrating skills that allow to support the child in learning, they feel discomfort in the implementation of remote preschool education as a solution to a rapid change.

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