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## **Pandemic vs. school – remote education in the Zespół Szkół Ogólnokształcących im. Juliusza Słowackiego (Schools of the Civic Educational Association) in Cracow**

### **Abstract**

Zespół Szkół Ogólnokształcących im. Juliusza Słowackiego (Schools of the Civic Educational Association) is an institution that unites a primary school, a secondary school of general education, and a kindergarten. Like the entire educational environment in Poland, in March 2020, the school complex faced decisions that required a change in the organization of norms, principles, habits, and mentality overnight to maintain the continuity of teaching. The first undertaken actions were the establishment of the school's crisis management staff, numerous letters from the school principal addressed to the parents, teacher training, changing and adjusting the work hours, verifying students' existing email addresses, and launching online learning platforms, as well as providing computer equipment to students in a difficult situation. The next step was to improve the quality of education and exchange of practices and experience between teachers. Regular meetings of teachers in educational teams and organizational groups began to take place. As a result of the prolonged period of isolation, difficulties have arisen requiring putting into effect the psychological and pedagogical support. At the times of improvement of the epidemiological situation in the country and partial lifting of the lock down, consultations were organized at the school for secondary school students and eighth-graders, the activities of the sports and tourism school association "Glosator" were used to organize sports activities in the sanitary regime. The working time of the youngest students at school, from integrated teaching, was used for the organization of a ski camp, and during the winter break, day camps were organized in accordance with the recommendations of the ministry.

**Keywords:** school complex; distance learning; Glosator school association; project management

### **Introduction**

The Civic Educational Association was established in 1987 as an NGO operating through independent field offices. The Association was established by parents

and teachers rebelling against uniform communist education, out of longing for true freedom to allow the free development of future generations. According to the Program Declaration of the Civic Educational Association adopted by the 1st General Assembly of Members on 22 January 1989, it was proposed: "We want to establish a variety of educational establishments offering good learning conditions for children and good working conditions for teachers. Schools that raise kids creatively, encourage learning, develop the personality. We do not offer any revolutionary solutions. A small group of students, a well-qualified teacher, a personal contact between the child and the teacher, the development of talents and creative skills, encouraging self-acquisition of knowledge, caring for health and physical development, respect for the student, providing him or her with a sense of security, acceptance, and joy of life – these requirements are known and indisputable. Schools should be small, embedded in the local community, and subject to parental supervision." A particular emphasis in the idea of the Civic Educational Association, outside of education, is placed on upbringing, the development of which is possible thanks to the mutual trust of parents and teachers. The principles developed over the years have always remained far apart from the religion or political option supported, but are so concrete that they allow forming a true civic community for years on their basis. As the main goal, the schools being a part of the Civic Educational Association assume the shaping of the student as a mentally, socially, culturally, and physically important entity. Members participate in many civic initiatives, are interested in the condition of Polish education and, above all, its socialization. They take interest in important issues for the education system related to passing good, transparent law, consulting and issuing opinions on legal projects, organizing conferences or supporting initiatives that enrich the education of children, teenagers, and adults.

Zespół Szkół Ogólnokształcących im. Juliusza Słowackiego is run by the Independent Field Office No. 64 of the Civic Educational Association. On September 11, 1990, by the decision of the School Superintendent, a permission was initially obtained to establish a Community Primary School No. 4 in Cracow with grades 4-8 at Krowoderska Street No. 8 and Wrocławska Street No. 28 and Community Secondary School No. 3 in Cracow at Wrocławska Street No. 28. In the following years, grades 1-3 of integrated learning were established. Since the very beginning of the existence of the schools, the Sports and Tourism School Association "Glosator" has been in a cooperation with them. In 2011, the "Julek" kindergarten and in 2014 the Non-public Culture Center "Juliusz" began their activity. The "Stradom 10" Circle of Alumni is also constantly active in the school complex. The current structure is presented in Fig. 1.

In the school year 2020/2021, 30 preschoolers, more than 330 students of primary school grades (1-8), and more than 260 students of the secondary school were taught at the school complex. The school had 130 employees, of which 110 were the teaching staff.

The period of the pandemic, in which the school complex had to function just like others all around the globe, forced the school complex to overnight change the daily life of the entire school community. Educated in the spirit of the idea that

guided the current education - actions that introduce a person to a valuable life through education and upbringing in accordance with the prevailing patterns and goals in a given society (Marcinek, 2006) - teachers, students, and parents had to enter into new unknown roles. These activities have become particularly difficult due to the fact that the basic need of people enabling their proper functioning is their direct relationship, and this relationship has been disturbed overnight. As Pyżalski (2020) writes, “the necessary condition for proper functioning in the world is the relationship with other people, their direct physical presence”, and this is confirmed by mirror mechanisms known since the last decade of the 20th century (Keyzers, 2017). Remote teaching, not practiced on such a large scale in Poland, has become a huge challenge. In addition, distance learning also involves separate methodological concepts (Bednarek & Lubina, 2008), to which it was necessary to adapt very quickly. The paths of education and upbringing of the younger generation, which have been developed over the years, although still an indisputable pillar, in distance learning were shifted at first to the background, to the benefit of the organization and, shortly afterwards, also support that had to be given to everyone in a broadly defined range.

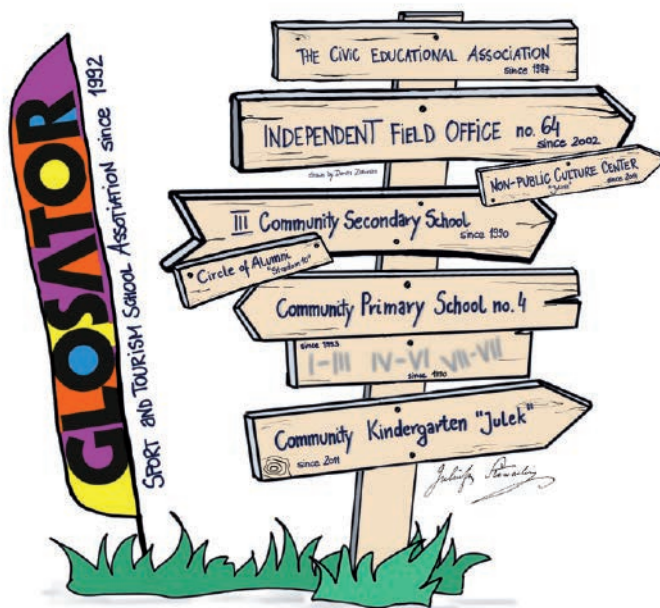


Fig. 1. The structure of the Zespól Szkół Ogólnokształcących im. Juliusza Słowackiego and the co-existing units forming the institution.

## Methodology of the research

This paper describes a case study of the proposed solutions in distance learning, changes and modifications to the existing education and upbringing

program implemented in the Juliusz Słowacki school complex in Cracow from March 2020 to May 2021. The study was conducted twice in the same experimental group – once in May in the 2019/2020 school year and the second in June in the 2020/2021 school year.

## Results and discussion

The initial activities preparing the school complex to work in a deep lockdown situation were based on the creation of a system of efficient school organization both at the level of communication between the administration and teachers, teachers and students, as well as teachers and parents. The first days were devoted to checking the functionality of student school accounts and numerous teacher trainings using the available Google tools – Meet, Drive, and Classroom. They were the basis for the daily activities of teachers and students throughout the distance learning period and enabled the implementation of the current material. The use of these tools during distance learning in the school year 2020/2021 is compiled in Fig. 2.

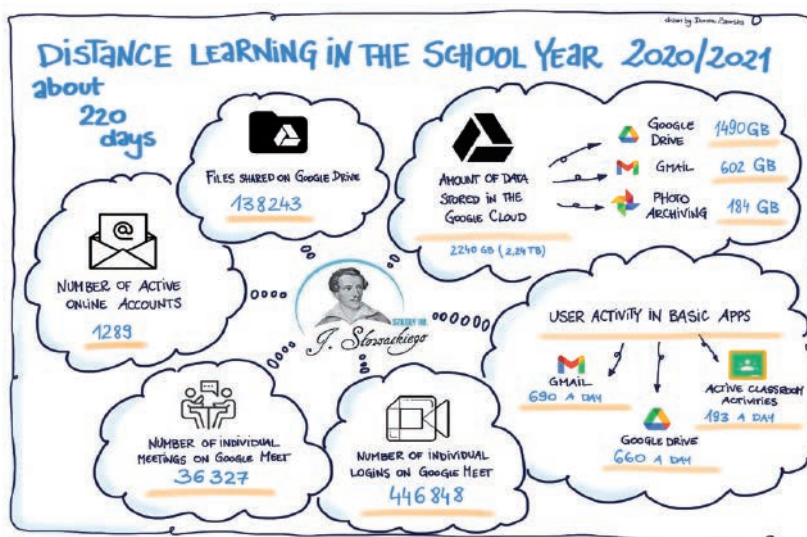


Fig. 2. Use of information technology resources in distance learning in the 2020/2021 school year.

The analyses show that these basic apps were used daily: Gmail by 690 users, Drive by 660 users, and active Classroom classes by 193 users. In total, 138,243 files were shared using Google Drive which translates into 2.24 TB of data stored in the Google Cloud. For over 220 days, 36,327 hours of individual meetings were held via Google Meet, with 446,848 individual logins.

Subsequently, based on a cooperation with other institutions, schools, and using the cooperation with research facilities, Moodle, MS Teams, ZOOM, Facebook, and You Tube were also included in the work. Cameras and microphones installed in classrooms, which allowed students in quarantine or real-time isolation to participate in real-time classrooms through the

aforementioned applications, were of great importance when some students returned to school as the restrictions were lifted. Due to the size of the school, improving communication between the levels was a key element of cooperation in the difficult conditions. With the launch of distance learning in the school complex, the school crisis management staff was formed, which included the School Management and the representatives or plenipotentiaries of all levels of education, additionally supported by the administrative, technical, and IT department. Staff meetings at the key, early moments of the pandemic took place daily and then at regular weekly intervals. The school's equipment, both computers and tablets, was lent to students from large families and teachers working with their families in their own homes to facilitate their daily work. Depending on the level of education, the timetable has been modified. The daily distance learning was started not only by students of older classes, but soon also by students of integrated education and kindergarten. In these classes, as well as grades 4-6 of the primary school, the timetable has been modified, together with the designation of the so-called "lessons in the snow". The daily schedule introduced programmed classes, where the teacher left the materials and tasks to students through Classroom. Such procedures allowed to control the length of working time of the youngest students in front of the computers, who from the school benches had to move to the virtual reality. To work with students of integrated learning, alongside the tutors, specific common room teachers were engaged and permanently assigned to individual classes. On the other hand, at the time when the distance learning started in the 2020/2021 school year, all real-time online lessons at every level of education have already taken place throughout the school year.

A great improvement in the daily work of students was the development of school regulations for distance learning and evaluation, as well as rules for online participation in physical education classes. Although the formula and scope of both documents, over many months of work and changing laws, have been subject to numerous modifications, they have always been an irrevocable element allowing the maintenance of discipline and relatively high dutifulness of students to carry out the tasks assigned to them. The letters of school principal, of which there were 35 in the school year 2019/2020, 54 in 2020/2021 and only 8 in the years of stationary learning, performed the strengthening function in the day-to-day communication.

There have also been non-stop school activities that allowed maintaining the continuity of teaching. Online, there was, among others, the recruitment for the first grades in both primary and secondary school. In addition, online meetings of parents with tutors as well as with other teachers in the form of an Open Day were also held on a regular basis.

Given the enormous value of education and upbringing, on the basis of which the prestige of the school complex was built over the years, a significant amount of work has been transferred to the balance of adaptation of this area to distance learning. Undoubtedly, the biggest objective was the continuity in the implementation of the core curriculum. Over time, the quality and attractiveness of online lessons had performed the most important role in achieving this goal. The day-to-day work included all kinds of webinars and workshops conducted in cooperation with research facilities, universities, also conducted by parents who were experts from different fields. Due to the program of the fall camps being very firmly rooted in the school activities, defending school projects, which are the results of scientific project trips this time taking place in September, was also carried out online. At times of improvement of the pandemic situation in the country under the sanitary regime, test exams of the eighth graders and Matura consultations were conducted on the school premises. There were as many as three pre-Matura consultation sessions for secondary school classes.

The time of isolation and restrictions on movement has affected the decline in physical condition among students, as pointed out by doctors around the world. To meet the needs of the school complex, a proprietary program of physical education classes was developed. Appropriate legal solutions introduced before the start of the work – the rules and declaration of parents to provide space in accordance with the principles of health and safety for the implementation of activities by the child at home, created a temporary opportunity to include stretching exercises and fitness in the daily work in front of the computer. Students also carried out individual activities in sports clubs on the basis of appropriate declarations made by parents. Later, modern applications were used in the implementation of physical education classes – Endomondo “A Step for Health”. The most interesting and successful, however, was the MapMyRun application, on the basis of which physical education teachers developed challenges for students, their families, and teachers.

Although distance learning has limited many opportunities to make a full use of school resources, there were 128 additional and extracurricular activities conducted online in the 2020/2021 school year, by nearly 70 teachers. There were common classes for preschoolers and students of grades 1-3 of integrated teaching – afternoon “Reading on the screen”, subject and Olympic interest clubs. Campaigns were organized under the motto “Holidays with a native speaker” or “Holidays with physical education”. Both internal and external training was undertaken on a continuous basis by the teachers. At the moments of lifting the pandemic restrictions, the classes organized by the Sports and Tourism School Association “Glosator” performed a huge role. Working well during the stationary learning, the tourism club SzKoT during the distance learning became an opportunity for students to leave their homes. Although in the sanitary regime, in a limited number of people, and very often faced with a great deal of uncertainty resulting from changes in response to the legal situation, secondary school students participated in ski-touring outings, and elementary school students in sightseeing tours. The ski and snowboarding sections have become the basis for organizing one-day trips and an opportunity to take staff training for the degree of a demonstrator and the instructor’s assistant, which has been a point of pride of the school complex for years. As part of the athletics section, there were field consultations on physical education classes. The time of easing the restrictions, when the situation improved in the country, even allowed for organizing day camps during the winter break and holidays, and in the school year 2020/2021 even a 5-day ski camp in Bukowina Tatrzańska for students of grades 1-3 of the primary school, who had the opportunity to attend stationary classes.

The upbringing program in the school complex is based on broadly understood project management. Each year, class teams and individual students participate in a range of activities based on projects’ policy. Distance learning has forced many activities to be transferred “to the web”. The “Following the traces of independence” field game, very popular among Cracow schools, carried out as part of the “Patriotic Education” project was transformed into an inter-school online quiz. Based on materials prepared by the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews for form tutor periods and history classes, students participated in the celebration of the anniversary commemorating the uprising in the Warsaw Ghetto. The “Ecology and Health” project incorporated the Earth Day celebrations and organized internal online competitions. As a part of the “Good Relations” project, The Day of Kindness was celebrated, and the “School of Debate” based on the Oxford debate system, known in Cracow secondary schools, was implemented through accessible online platforms.



An inseparable point of pride of the school complex for years has been openness to the needs of another person implemented in the activities of the “Volunteering” project. From the integrated education to the secondary school, every year students prepared Christmas Eve at the St. Albert’s Homeless Shelter in Cracow, which was attended by many homeless people. Distance learning made it impossible to carry out the activity in a standard form, but nevertheless, as part of the pre-Christmas help, students prepared packages with their families for the wards of the organizations: the St. Padre Pio Foundation, the Sisters Canonesses of the Holy Spirit, Social Integration Centre ‘PRO DOMO’, Wspólnota Nasz Dom, Saint Albert’s Caritas Kitchen. The aid operation was also carried out for the first time around Easter. Students, though on their own but just like every year, engaged in a cooperation with the Cracow animal shelter as part of the action “Christmas for animals”, Noble Gift or the Great Orchestra of Christmas Charity. Improving the IT skills of the entire school community has allowed for broadcasts and combining live video conferencing with recordings, thereby allowing for participating together in large school celebrations such as the school year-end gala or the school Christmas meeting.

After a while, the prolonged period of isolation began to leave a greater mark on the mental health of the entire school community. Students lacked contact with their peers, teachers often worked much more than normal, and yet teaching efficiency decreased, while some parents of the students faced difficult decisions to shut down their own economic activities. The help and counselling of the school’s pedagogical and psychological team began to gain enormous value at this point. In fact, everyone was involved in the mutual support. Parents of students running their own therapeutic practice on a daily basis started the “If you’re not feeling well – call!” campaign, a very large part of the activities were also directed at specialized consultations for teachers and/or parents. The school principal, invited specialists, parents who were experts took an active part in these activities. Online mask sewing workshops were organized, relaxation yoga classes were carried out by a holistic parent-trainer, or webinars were conducted on distance learning and problems with learning at home. Despite the isolation, the Secondary School Student Council was very responsibly involved in helping. It was thanks to the initiative of secondary school students that intensive tutoring started for elementary school students, as well as assistance was organized for children of medics, initially from the school community and later also from outside the environment of the Civic Educational Association. During the entire distance learning, re-education classes in the form of video conferences and psychological consultations took place. A very large project on a nationwide scale became the “A Computer for a Better Tomorrow” campaign, in which computers obtained from Cracow companies, after recovery, adaptation of software, and other necessary changes were transferred initially to students from the school complex, then from Małopolska, and eventually even to students from other voivodeships. The action was supported by secondary school students who received contact details from the gifted persons to act as expert-assistants in the framework of peer cooperation in the case of any difficulties. As financial support for families in difficulty, a school crisis package – the Friendly Help Fund, was launched and a mutual business support plan was developed for members of Independent Field Office No. 64 of the Civic Educational Association.

To continuously improve the course of the distance learning process and to take into consideration the opinions of students in the implementation of the undertaken activities, an evaluation questionnaire was conducted twice. Due to the high repeatability of the obtained results, the data were presented in most cases only for the school year 2020/2021, except for one question on difficulties encountered during distance learning, where students’ answers were

compared for two years. More than 90% of respondents answered yes or rather yes to the question asked to students about their ability to perform tasks prepared by teachers by themselves (Fig. 3).

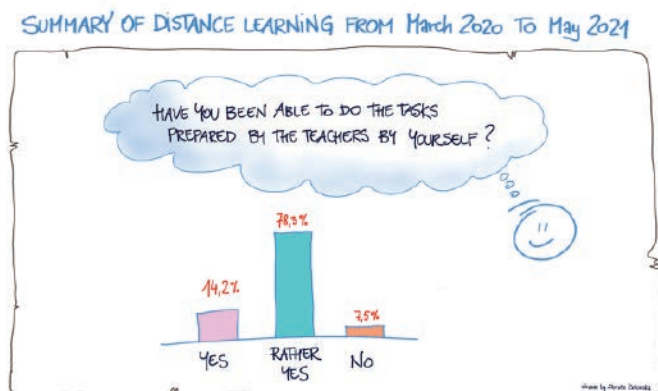


Fig. 3. A summary of the results of the surveyed students constituting the answer to the question: "Have you been able to do the tasks prepared by the teachers by yourself?" The results represent the average of the responses provided by respondents in the school years 2019/2020 and 2010/2021.

Only 7.5% of surveyed students needed additional help.

According to the students, the amount of material prepared by the teachers in distance learning (Fig. 4) was far too large for 17.9% and for 56.4% rather too large.

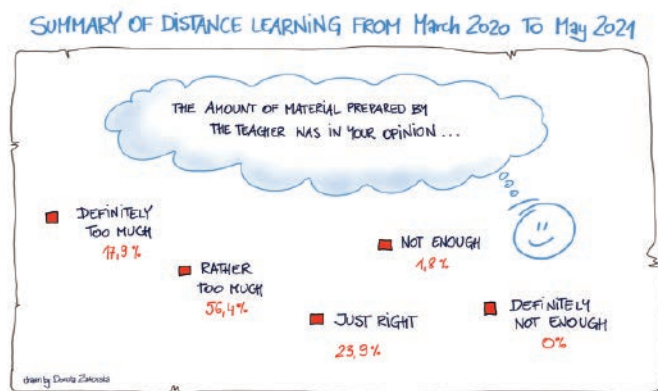


Fig. 4. A summary of the results of the surveyed students constituting the answer to the question: "The amount of material prepared by the teacher was in your opinion..." The results represent the average of the responses provided by respondents in the school years 2019/2020 and 2010/2021.

Only 1.8% of those surveyed said that the material was not enough, and 23.9% said it was just right.



When asked about the amount of free time students had during distance learning (Fig. 5), 62.3% of those surveyed said they had more time than during stationary learning, 21.7% said that they had the same amount of time, and 16% of respondents said that they had less time than during stationary learning.

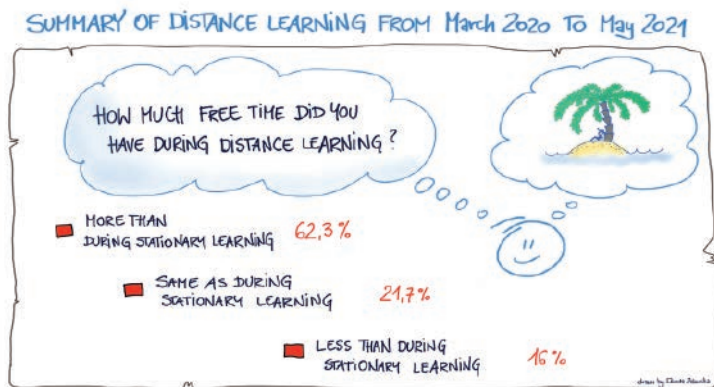


Fig. 5. A summary of the results of the surveyed students constituting the answer to the question: “How much free time did you have during distance learning?” The results represent the average of the responses provided by respondents in the school years 2019/2020 and 2010/2021.

A very important question in the students’ opinion referred to indicating the good sides of distance learning (Fig. 6).

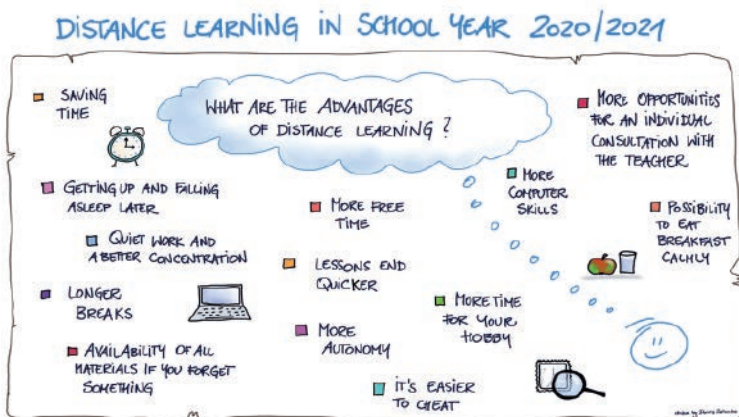


Fig. 6. A summary of the results of the surveyed students constituting the answer to the question: “What are the advantages of distance learning?” The results represent the average of the responses provided by respondents in the school years 2019/2020 and 2010/2021.

Students most often indicated in their answers: saving time, getting up and going to sleep later, working in silence and with a better concentration, longer breaks,

accessibility to all materials, more free time, lessons ending quicker, more autonomy and more time for their hobby, easier cheating, greater computer skills, more opportunities for individual consultation with the teacher, or the possibility of eating breakfast calmly.

Due to the significant discrepancy between the answers provided among the same group of respondents in the school year 2019/2020 and 2020/2021, in the case of the question of the greatest difficulties encountered during distance learning, the students' answers are summarized in two separate blocks (Fig. 7).

The initial time of isolation was certainly a huge surprise for students, which is why as the greatest difficulty encountered during distance learning, they pointed to problems with the Internet or with understanding of the material, as well as the lack of direct contact with the teacher. Only 1% of respondents pointed to equipment problems as the greatest difficulty and the same number of % encountered no difficulties (Fig. 7A). In the following school year, there were visible differences in the answers to this question from the same respondents. The greatest difficulty according to students was the problems with mobilization, still very often the answers were also about the lack of direct contact with the teacher, problems with understanding the material or with the Internet (Fig. 7B), although the percentage of the choice of these answers was lower than in the previous year. In the statements of the students, very often, alongside the learning itself, there was a sense of a huge loss in peer contact.

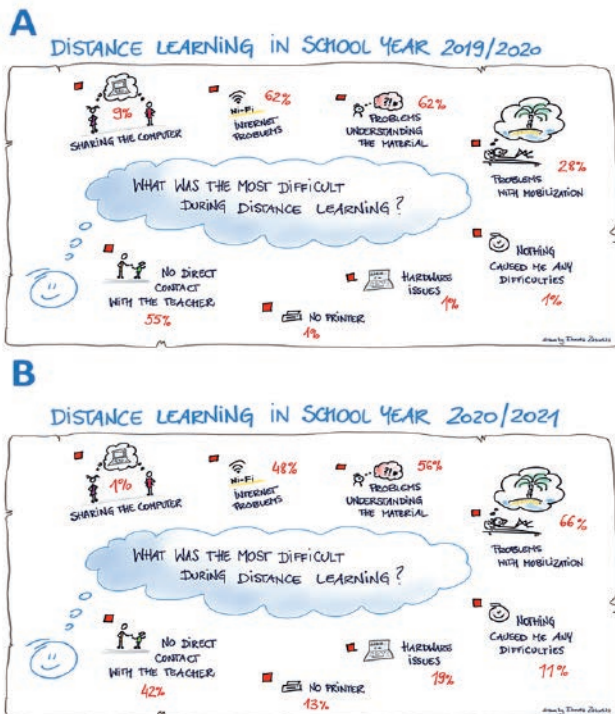


Fig. 7. A summary of the results of the surveyed students constituting the answer to the question: "What was the most difficult during distance learning?" in 2019/2020 (A) and 2020/2021 (B).

Undoubtedly, the time of the pandemic and distance learning has had a great impact on changing the mentality of young people from different backgrounds. For some, it was a time of intense work, for others a moment to rationally explain the decline of one's self-mobilization, for others a period of struggle to survive the next day. What was it like for the students of the Juliusz Słowacki school complex? – they should be asked carefully about that themselves, but undoubtedly the measures proposed and implemented by the school were not grounds for them to feel that this time had been completely wasted.

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