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Personal and Social Education Carried out by Polish Primary Schools during the COVID-19 Pandemic – Two Insights into Early Childhood Education

Abstract

Remote education caused by the spread of SARS-CoV-2 virus proved to be a difficult experience for all of its participants. Teachers and parents faced logistical and organisational challenges in teaching young children, but were equally affected by educational and socio-emotional development issues. The aim of this article is to present how personal and social education (PSE) was carried out by Polish teachers of the first three grades of primary school during remote classes. The authors conducted an empirical qualitative study in early 2021, before the third school closures in Poland. The study involved 20 teachers and 20 parents of pupils in grades

1–3 of public primary schools from the Mazovian voivodeship. A semi-structured interview was used to explore the experiences of the respondents and obtain information to address the research question: "How was personal and social education carried out by teachers during remote education in grades 1–3 of Polish primary schools in the COVID-19 pandemic?", which referred to the activities used by teachers to implement remote personal and social education, as well as the parents' and teachers' opinions as regards this process. The conclusion pointed out by the majority of respondents was the need to adapt to utterly new conditions, to focus on the emotional and social needs of the youngest pupils being the result of an unfamiliar, remote reality. The PSE with the youngest pupils during the pandemic was carried out in two ways: prevention and intervention. Prevention took place during everyday meetings, and took the form of a talk about their experiences from the previous day or anything that mattered to children within the time of the online classes. Intervention took place only when needed, and took such forms as an individual conversation with the pupil, a conversation with a parent or other.

Keywords: remote education, personal and social education, primary school, early education.

Introduction

At the beginning of 2020 many countries suffered from the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic. In Poland during the first wave of the pandemic, the functioning of many institutions was restricted with a few days' notice. The closure of schools affected an estimated 1,401,026 children in pre-school education and 4,891,056 students in primary, lower secondary and upper secondary schools and over 513.9 thousand teachers in all types of schools and pre-schools (GUS, 2020).

Educational institutions had to start working in a different form, for which neither teachers nor learners were prepared. The first suspension of in-school classes in Poland took place on 12 March 2020 (MEiN, 2020a). This situation caused confusion and anxiety among teachers and families forced to participate in this difficult process of adaptation of education to pandemic conditions. On 25 May 2020, some teachers and pupils (e.g. primary schools: grades 1–3) returned to schools (MEiN, 2020b). All pupils had to return to distance education on 9 November 2020 (MEiN, 2020c). School buildings remained locked up until the beginning of 2021; the youngest pupils (grades 1–3) came back to schools on 18 January 2021 under strict sanitary regime (MEiN, 2021a). From 22 March to 11 April 2021 remote learning took place again in all classes of primary schools for children and adolescents across the

country (MEiN, 2021b). Depending on the growth of infections in each region, the youngest students returned to distance, hybrid or in-school learning. On 3 May 2021, primary school pupils from grades 1–3 returned to school, while older pupils returned in the following weeks (MEiN, 2021c).

Teachers and parents faced organisational challenges of remote education, but were also forced to take up issues of a different nature – connected with pupils' personal and social education, disturbed at this emotionally turbulent time. This article aims to provide an overview of the socio-personal educational activities carried out by teachers of grades 1–3, as well as the challenges and opinions on the subject presented by teachers and parents.

Theoretical and empirical foundations

The complexity of personal and social education requires that we reflect on it in an exploratory spirit, based both on our experiences and, above all, on scientific research. While trying to refer to the theory, one can encounter typologies of its definitions, placing it in the context of narrow and broad meanings (Zarzecki, 2012; Łobocki, 2013), and diverse approaches – from directing human development in the educational process to supporting the development of pupils (Łobocki, 2013). There is no doubt that behind the definitions presented there are always specific trends in pedagogy and the definitions change over time. Wroczyński (1976) saw personal and social education (PSE) as a system of actions aimed at specific educational outcomes, while Dewey (1897) understood it as the process of growth of the individual into the social consciousness of the species. The current Polish legislation defines it as "supporting the child in the development towards full maturity in the physical, emotional, intellectual, spiritual and social spheres, reinforced and complemented by activities in the field of prevention of children and youth problems" (Law on School Education, art. 1, item 3). While discussing the variety of definitions of the concept, the difficulties in translating should also be mentioned. As used in Polish, the word "upbringing" (*wychowanie*) can be understood differently in other countries. In many, this term is not present at all. For example it is not used commonly in English-speaking countries, according to a view that it is an education that determines the characteristics of a well-behaved person. Because of this, such terms as *civic*

education or *moral educatio*n or others are being widely used (Tagunova, 2016). At this point *character education* can also be recalled, understood as "a comprehensive school based approach to fostering the moral development of students" (Berkowitz & Bier, 2005, p. 65). Throughout the article, we will use the term personal and social education in relation to teachers' work with the students. We understand this concept as something more than the narrow understandings mentioned above. The term itself is taken from the Scottish educational reality, where Personal and Social Education is a specific time-tabled lesson meant to "ensure that children and young people develop the knowledge and understanding, skills, resilience, capabilities and attributes which they need for mental, emotional, social and physical wellbeing" (Scottish Government, 2019, p. 1). Similar content can be found in the curriculum of Personal, Social, Health and Economic Education – a non-statutory subject recommended by the educational authorities in England (Department for Education, 2020). Although the term we have adopted is derived from systemic measures, we understand it like Needham, who stated that "every primary schoolteacher is a teacher of personal and social education, not just at allocated times but at all times of each day, explicitly and implicitly" (2003, p. 162). We may state that with the process of learning and teaching, this kind of action completes the education in its wider definition. It also seems important to outline the difference between PSE, socialisation, and enculturation. The course of socialisation introduces new generations of people into the areas of social life. A human being is shaped by society from the moment of birth, and everything that happens to them throughout their life depends on their level of social and cultural assimilation (Durkheim, 1968). In this context, socialisation is mainly the process of adaptation of children, adolescents and adults to the environmental conditions in which they have to live. Enculturation can be understood as the learning process by which an individual enters into the cultural life of a given society. Through enculturation, an individual becomes a carrier of the culture in which he/she grows up (Zarzecki, 2012). Unlike PSE, socialisation and enculturation are not intentional activities – they are unplanned and unintended. The intentionality of the educational process is linked to certain policies, institutions and methods. However, it is clear that apart from intentional actions, the school cannot be a fully planned educational environment. While considering its

socio-personal influence, we must leave room for pure group impact and basic social learning. Bandura's (1971) theory states that people can learn new information and behaviours simply by watching other people. We must not forget that an important part of the school system is the class, which fits into the definition of a small social group, with its characteristics, dynamics and impact on pupils. Schools may offer their pupils formal and informal groups, as well as the hidden curriculum (Çubukçu, 2012), all of which have socio-personal educational consequences. In this context, children's loss in the times of the pandemic is enormous.

The school, understood as the primary educational institution concerned with education in accordance with the norms and objectives accepted in a given society (Łobocki, 2013), can therefore be seen as an educational environment in which PSE should be implemented in a purposeful, planned and professional manner.

In Poland there are regulations concerning the obligation to organise PSE in schools. The scope of tasks and responsibilities of teachers in this field should be specified in the school statute (Prawo Oświatowe, 2016, art. 98, item 4) and include additional requirements introduced in Polish legislation. The forms of fulfilling those tasks should be adapted to the age of students, their needs and the environmental conditions of the school. In grades 1–3 of primary schools, personal and social education is placed together with Polish, natural science, mathematics and technical classes, and according to the regulations, the division of hours into particular classes is made by the teacher (MEN, 2012).

The care of a class requires that a teacher gets to know the pupils – their living conditions, family situation, needs and interests. The class teacher should organise the educational environment, integrate the class, take care of good relations between the pupils, develop their social activity, shape a proper attitude to learning and student duties, solve conflicts, implement preventive activities and many more. Teachers should cooperate with psychological and pedagogical specialists, by analysing the sources of learning failures, educational, social and personal difficulties, planning and implementing appropriate remedial measures, keeping in mind especially those children who are in need of selective and indicative prevention (Ostaszewski, 2016; Borucka, 2017) or intervention measures. Children living in unstable house-

holds rely on the school to provide them with a safe, nurturing environment and take steps to compensate for deficiencies as a consequence of other educational environments (WHO, 2020). The implementation of the aims of PSE and prevention at the first level of education should be organised in such a way that all pupils, irrespective of their psycho-physical development, have the opportunity to understand basic social processes occurring in their immediate and distant environment and display behaviours appropriate to the given situation (Konopczyński et al., 2017), even during a pandemic.

The great importance of the issue of children's psychological well-being during the pandemic and remote learning, and the secondary role of teaching in this context, was pointed out by UNESCO experts, who noted that the most important thing is to focus first on students' psychological needs, then – on didactics or implementation of the curriculum, which is reflected in the words: "Maslow before Bloom" (Doucet et al., 2020).

A large number of parents were concerned that their children's social development had been profoundly disrupted in the aftermath of the pandemic. Especially for younger children, the loss of interaction with peers and the in--school environment affected the development of their social and emotional skills (Bhamani et al., 2020). 44% of the students thought that remote learning had a negative impact on their mood (PwC Advisory, 2020). Every fourth student surveyed (24.2%) felt that they could not remotely discuss problems with the class teacher. One in ten (11.7%) claimed that in remote education they could not count on teachers' help and support, and for almost 30% online contacts with teachers were a source of stress (Bieganowska-Skóra & Pankowska, 2020). On the other hand, when it comes to assessing the quality of the relationship with the class teacher, the majority of respondents did not notice any change compared to the time before the pandemic, 23% believed that the pre-pandemic relationship was better and just over 4% believed that it was worse (Ptaszek et al., 2020).

As research indicates, one in four students did not notice remote contacts between parents and teachers (Bieganowska-Skóra & Pankowska, 2020). The majority of students (63%) said that the class teacher took an interest in whether they had the right equipment and internet at home to participate in remote education (Ptaszek et al., 2020). What is more, the process of communication with parents during the pandemic was assessed by teachers

as good (Piechowska & Romanowska, 2020). Undoubtedly, remote learning also affected peer relationships (Buchner & Wierzbicka, 2020; Ptaszek et al., 2020; ClickMeeting, 2021) but mainly those at school (PwC Advisory, 2020). According to teachers, the main factor of the children's bad emotional state was the lack of contact with peers. Particularly the youngest students, who did not write and did not have smartphones to communicate, suffered badly from isolation (Buchner & Wierzbicka, 2020; ClickMeeting, 2021).

Teachers' observations on the possibility of carrying out social and personal education during the pandemic seem to be of particular importance. In teachers' opinion, distance learning enabled the delivery of the core curriculum to a higher degree than the personal and social education – there was a prevailing lack of confidence in the school's ability to fulfil its educational function in this field during remote education (Jaskulska & Jankowiak, 2020).

It should be recognised that PSE has not been investigated comprehensively. It is the remote educational work, the challenges experienced when using digital tools and transition to on-line teaching and learning that have been the subject of a great majority of the studies carried out so far (Gajderowicz & Jakubowski, 2020; Jaskulska & Jankowiak, 2020; Marchlik et al., 2020; Plebańska et al., 2020). The present study, however, casts light on PSE itself.

The study

The authors of this paper conducted an empirical qualitative study in February and March 2021, right before the third school closures and another round of remote teaching of children in grades 1–3 in Polish public primary schools. The research consisted of 20 interviews with young learners' parents and 20 interviews with primary school teachers, all from the Mazovian voivodeship. The main research question was: "How was personal and social education carried out during remote education in grades 1–3 of Polish primary schools in the COVID-19 pandemic?".

The selection of the study participants was based on the convenience standard. To ensure that the ethical standards are met the respondents were assured that they would remain anonymous and the information they provided – confidential. Considering the specific nature of the empirical qualita-

tive study, it is worth pointing out that the results can be mainly referenced to the studied group and can provide a starting point for further studies.

The study can be described as exploratory and descriptive. The researchers applied a semi-structured interview in order to explore the experiences of each respondent, clarify most relevant issues and get all possible information while creating a positive atmosphere that allowed interviewees to address the issues raised openly and honestly.

The authors prepared an interview guide with topics and open-ended questions to be covered during the interview (Brenner, 2006; Morgan & Guevara, 2008; Adams, 2015). Each interview began with the same opening – the respondents were asked to describe both lockdowns. The following questions concerned all of the topics previously selected by the researchers to answer the research questions, for instance the teacher–parents contacts or the challenges faced. The data analysis started with identifying key ideas from the interview transcripts during initial coding. In-vivo coding was used to create further categories and prepare higher-level categorisation.

The limitations of the study concerned mostly the data collection process. As the pandemic made it impossible for the interviews to be conducted in person, the researchers used Zoom as the means of communication and recording of the meeting. Another limitation was using an interview guide instead of a strict questionnaire. The researcher had to be able to formulate questions adequate to the interview flow, but still in line with the topics. This required good communication and interpersonal skills necessary to build relationships with research participants (Brown & Danaher, 2019). The last limitation was connected with one of the interviewed groups – parents. While the teachers took an active part in the teaching process, the parents were not always able to answer all the questions concerning research topics.

Findings
Implementation of personal and social education

Based on the presented research we managed to prepare a typology of forms of PSE work in remote teaching. The basic criteria of division concern the purpose. Presented forms of work were divided into *prevention* and *intervention*.

In emergency remote education, prevention realised by schools was obviously limited. In the field of PSE, teachers mainly carried out preventive tasks of a general nature. Selective and indicative forms connected with children's personal and social development appeared less frequently in respondents' statements. Group forms dominated, although individual forms of work were also mentioned.

While describing the preventive activities, the teachers drew attention to the importance of supporting peer contacts and relations. One teacher talked about using the same tool for online lessons to organise a special space for the class to meet after lessons, with or without the teacher.

> The children had a special channel created, […] where they could just talk to each other. […] They had the possibility to hang out a bit after lessons. It was space for them to be with each other for a while. [T1]

Teachers also dedicated some of their time during the online classes to work on issues related to PSE. Although strict lessons of that type are not distinguished in grades 1–3 (they are mixed with other contents), teachers tried to organise time to conduct such activities. Sometimes they were of a more educational nature, e.g. concerning hygiene.

In some facilities, when children did not yet know each other well or for other reasons, special emphasis was placed on activities of an inclusive nature:

> In our case, just before the remote classes, we insisted and the parents persuaded the authorities that we should go to a "green school". [T8]

Sometimes it seemed to be important to pick up a subject relevant for the class, e.g., when children were supposed to pass to 4th grade, teachers used pedagogical talks to help them.

> The kids were also a bit scared that they were about to enter the fourth grade. What will it be like in grade four? How are they supposed to find themselves? How will they cope? Hmm, here we also had to spend a lot of time talking to them. [T6]

During significant moments involving children, their families and the community, teachers sought to find time and opportunity to celebrate and build fellowship:

> During Easter the kids made Easter cards for each other. There was also a presentation made of those cards. We just tried to show each other that we care about each other. [T1]

Teachers often emphasised in their interviews the importance of their presence – they tried to be available to pupils and their carers. This is how one teacher described this approach:

> They know that they can talk to me, that they can write to me, that I will call them back. [T2]

In the context of accessibility, teachers also pointed out the value of casual talks. Some teachers tried to be in touch with children in a more managed way. One of the teachers contacted the students on a regular basis by phone.

One of the parents recalled the system of meetings organised by the teacher:

> In our school, the teacher adopted a system in which she met with the children one by one, i.e. they had an appointed time. [P20]

The teachers emphasised that regardless of the educational programme they were following, they always found time to talk about difficult issues regarding these unusual circumstances.

> We've definitely had a lot of moments when kids were able to speak up about the difficulties they faced in remote education. [T11]

In addition to pedagogical talk, teachers felt obliged to be role models to their students, even remotely. Knowing that students learnt through observation and modelling, they tried to maintain high standards of behaviour and communication.

In terms of interventions, i.e. those teacher actions that were a consequence of negative incidents or difficulties in pupils' behaviour, we were able to distinguish, inter alia, solving problems on an ongoing basis in cooperation with parents over the phone, online or in person.

On the other hand, teachers attempted to implement solutions enabling educational work with children whose home situation did not allow for such work:

> The school allowed them to participate in classes remotely from the school building. [...] One teacher supervised the work a bit and I had peace of mind that the kids were being looked after. [T8]

Guaranteeing basic working conditions for children was essential for carrying out educational work with them. In case of situations requiring intervention the main way teachers reacted was through a pedagogical talk:

> If one person did something wrong, well… They would stay with me after lessons and I would give them a talk. [T3]

One teacher even commented that this was the only way they could do it.

It is notable that, both in terms of purely preventive measures and in the case of difficult situations requiring intervention, teachers emphasised the particular role of support. In intervention situations, it was mentioned in two contexts: group-based and teacher-implemented. The first one may be exampled by this opinion:

> It was great that in this kind of […] pandemic panic, they were supporting each other. [T11]

Support provided by the teacher was described in this way by one of the respondents:

> They were very anxious not to get disconnected. […] So all the time I was reassuring them that it is alright, it could happen to anyone. And that's just it. [T6]

It is worth noting that parents observed many forms of work mentioned by the teachers. When asked about the educational work carried out in their children's schools, they mentioned, among others, consultation hours with the use of tools such as Librus or MS Teams, as well as the content presented during the classes:

> I don't think there's such a thing as a specific form time lesson in the early grades, but sometimes certain topics result from the programme, from the textbook, the children just learn some rules of functioning in society and then they also talk openly about various topics, traditions… [P19]

Both groups of respondents referred to challenges resulting from the sudden transition to remote education. In the opinions of both groups we can see a differentiation indicating that at times approaches to the possibility of implementing personal and social education remotely might be completely different.

Opinions and challenges

Parents and teachers faced many difficulties during their remote education. In the case of the research group, opinions and experiences were undoubtedly influenced by the fact that the children whose education was discussed during the interviews were the youngest pupils in primary schools. One of the teachers stressed:

> Well, it's hard via the computer. […] They're still small children. [T5]

Opinions varied widely regarding the possibility of completing tasks online. On the one hand, some teachers showed great understanding and empathy:

> I think in general with this remote teaching it's very important to teach as such, as if to transfer knowledge, but it was more important just to get used to the situation, to how we learn now, on what principle it is. [T6]

On the other hand, teachers noticed that something important was missing in their remote interaction:

> There is no form time class work as such when it comes to remote teaching. […] And there is no interaction between the children. There is no interaction with me, so… I can't say anything about personal and social education. [T5]

Other teachers claimed that this new educational situation had given rise to new problems and pedagogical difficulties:

> Personal and social education is always there. […] This kind of educational work always appears in the course of life, so to speak, and one deals with what is needed at a given moment. Apart from such standards, integration, cooperation, and so on. [T12]

There were opinions that stressed the need to adapt to the new situation, to focus on a different aspect of PSE due to different needs of the pupils, which was sometimes perceived as a lack of implementation of such tasks.

Similarly, not all parents observed elements of PSE or received any support:

> I even reported to the class teacher that my daughter was in a very bad mental condition and I was worried about her. And I asked for a short talk because my daughter had a lot of backlog. […] No such conversation took place. [P4]

Other parents were able to indicate certain forms of PSE used by teachers. Some replied that they had no such knowledge. This depended on their personal experiences and the extent to which they participated in their children's remote education. However, an interesting matter came up in one of the interviews. When asked about personal and social education during remote classes, one parent indicated better contact with teachers. In light of teachers' obligation to cooperate with parents, this seems to be positive feedback.

Teachers participating in the study also stressed two types of challenges that emerged in the context of remote PSE. One teacher talked about the need to reintroduce children to the rules that had been set up before remote education, and another reflected on difficulties that only became apparent upon

pupils' return to schools. As teachers indicated, it is the transition that was difficult for pupils. According to the teachers that took part in the study, some children seemed to have forgotten the rules and principles when switching between types of classes:

> And again from the beginning, when we switched to remote classes this school year, I had to remind them what the rules were from the start. Again. [T4]

On the other hand, teachers' experiences showed that they had to face pupils' behaviour problems when they returned to in-school teaching.

> When I returned to school, well, the problems kind of became apparent. […] And all these emotions were vented in class. By the time I entered the classroom, there was already a queue of students and a lot of problems that I had to solve. [T4]

Educational work with the youngest pupils allows for prevention and early intervention when a range of problems arise. As this research shows, a non-standard pandemic situation, where there were no instructions or pre--developed guidelines on the forms and scope of work in the field of personal and social education, required teachers to be creative and look for the best ways to respond to the needs of a particular group of children at a certain time. It seems that technical skills and ways of working can be developed by acting on the spot, as they play a complementary role. Addressing the PSE context while teaching remotely depends on teachers' sensitivity, awareness and willingness to accompany the children.

Discussion and conclusion

Conducting personal and social education remotely in primary school (grades 1–3) was a real challenge, yet a necessity due to the Polish law and the actual needs of the pupils themselves. Not only do such young children require continuous guidance, clearly established and constantly repeated rules, but they also need companionship. The research findings show that the way the socio-personal content was implemented seemed very different from that in the classroom.

Although some teachers claimed that they did not fulfil this obligation, interviews with teachers and some parents showed that in fact it was part of everyday routine. At times, they simply did not classify the activities undertaken, about which they spoke during the interviews, as personal and social education. It can also be suspected that some parents, when asked about this type of educational work, were not fully aware of the content of this notion and spoke of its complete absence. However, most teachers were sensitive to children's behaviour and reacted to it on a daily basis, sometimes unnoticed. In addition to different forms of support and intervention, there was preventive and educational content included in the lessons.

Referring to the obligation to assess pupils' behaviour, we must remember that teachers operated in changed conditions, facing different problems and using tools which they had not been with familiar from the beginning. With limited methods, it was mostly dictated by the simple fact of logging into the lesson, turning the camera on (if possible due to the quality of the internet connection), and doing homework on time. There were sometimes cases of students being cheeky and switching off the teacher's microphone or logging other students out of remote classes (which as some teachers stated should not even be possible technically, yet it was), and the teachers had to handle it on the spot. Nevertheless, pupils did not perceive difficulties in maintaining discipline during lessons (Ptaszek et al., 2020).

The teachers understood the children's need for companionship, being heard and sharing their feelings and concerns. A lot of the respondents stated that they had made space for loose conversation. Yet not all of the respondents' opinions were the same. One parent stated that despite requests for support and conversation with the child not coping with the remote education, the teacher had not provided such help. However, to reliably assess the well-being of pupils in a Polish school it is necessary to look closely at the difficulties (Bieganowska-Skóra & Pankowska, 2020). From this point of view, this even relatively isolated experience seems disturbing. The concern also stems from the fact that the interviews were conducted with teachers and parents of the youngest children. They had difficulties related to the very handling of the equipment necessary for remote education. Their dependence in this respect undoubtedly increased the stress for them and difficulties for the whole family. Another age-related issue concerns the possession and use

of communication tools – their lack, in the case of the youngest children, may have resulted in a shortage of peer contact (Buchner & Wierzbicka, 2020).

In remote education, knowledge of children's family and health situation became extremely important. The schools are obliged to help children in need, for example those from large families or families with limited resources, which at the time of the pandemic was often connected with the lack of equipment and, therefore, inability to participate in lessons. Another group were children with different disabilities and developmental difficulties. The pandemic also led to families experiencing specific difficulties – such as lack of possibility to supervise the children, which the school helped to address. Some of the schools showed exceptional sensitivity to children's and families' needs.

The pandemic and remote education undoubtedly temporarily changed the role of parents in education. From close observers, parents became active participants. If parents did not have to support teaching, they certainly had to facilitate the process. Thus, a change in the way of communicating with teachers seems natural in this situation. As the OECD recommends, "education systems should aim to strengthen engagement between schools and parents in order to improve information and guidance to parents on effective practices for supporting their children's learning" (2020, p. 2). It is worth mentioning that most parents taking part in the study indicated that remote education had a positive impact on good and quick contact with the teacher. They particularly liked remote forms of parent-teacher meetings.

Based on the research presented in this article it can be stated that personal and social education with the youngest pupils during the pandemic was carried out in two ways: preventive and interventional. Preventive work happened on a daily basis. The teachers were talking to children about their wellbeing, how they felt, what they had done during the day – anything that was important to them at that moment. This was the only way to create class unity and give a sense that teachers did care about their students – a very important factor for the children's development and mental health (Pianta, 1999; Weare, 1999). In addition, it needs to be highlighted that pedagogical talk is a powerful tool (Edwards-Groves, 2018) with which teachers help pupils make sense of learning, life and themselves (Johnston, 2004). Interventions were less frequent and took various forms. It may have been an individual

meeting with the student after scheduled lessons, a phone call to a parent to discuss a certain behaviour, or consultation with a specialist.

To sum up, based on the presented research it is clear that remote education of the youngest pupils is so much more than just instruction. What seems to be important is the presence of role models and a bigger emphasis on teaching social skills than digital ones.

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