

FOSTERING DIGITAL WELLBEING AND BALANCED SCREEN USE IN PRIMARY SCHOOL PUPILS

Estera SÎNGEORZAN, Ph.D. Cnd.,
Babeş Bolyai University of Cluj Napoca,
estera.singeorzan@yahoo.com

Alina Felicia ROMAN, Habil. Prof. Ph.D.,
Babeş Bolyai University of Cluj Napoca,
romanalinafelicia@yahoo.com

Abstract: *In today's increasingly digital world, children are exposed to screens from an early age, both in educational contexts and during leisure time. While technology offers significant benefits for learning and development, excessive or unregulated screen use can have negative consequences on children's physical health, emotional wellbeing, social skills, and academic performance. This article aims to explore how digital wellbeing and balanced screen use can be effectively fostered in primary school pupils, through a combination of pedagogical strategies, family involvement, and school policies. The article presents a theoretical overview of digital wellbeing, highlighting its importance in early education, followed by a qualitative research component based on focus groups with teachers and parents of primary school children. The findings reveal shared concerns regarding overexposure to screens, lack of digital self-regulation among pupils, and a need for consistent strategies between school and home. Teachers emphasized the educational value of technology when used purposefully, but also noted challenges in managing children's digital behavior. Parents expressed a desire for guidance and collaboration with schools to establish healthier digital habits at home. The results suggest that fostering digital wellbeing requires a holistic, collaborative approach that includes curriculum integration, teacher training, and parental support. Recommendations include introducing digital wellbeing education from an early age, promoting critical thinking about media use, and encouraging a balanced lifestyle that includes physical activity, face-to-face interaction, and screen-free time. This research contributes to the growing field of digital education by offering practical insights into how schools*

and families can work together to promote healthier, more conscious use of technology among young learners.

Keywords: *digital wellbeing; screen time; primary education; digital literacy; child development; focus group research; parental involvement; educational technology; healthy media use.*

Background

In the context of the ongoing expansion of digital technologies, the concept of digital wellbeing has become a major topic of interest in contemporary education. In the literature, it is defined as the state of balance individuals maintain between the use of digital resources and their cognitive, emotional, and social wellbeing (OECD, 2021; Beetham, 2022). Within educational settings, this balance is essential for developing healthy digital habits from the early stages of schooling. According to Livingstone and Helsper (2019), digital wellbeing represents “the learner’s ability to engage with the digital environment in a reflective, safe, and balanced manner that supports personal growth and long-term learning.” Likewise, Byrne et al. (2021) highlight the ethical dimension of digital wellbeing, linking it to media literacy, empathy, and civic responsibility in online contexts.

In the Romanian educational discourse, authors such as M. Bocoș (2017) and Ion Albușescu (2015) emphasize the need for an integrative pedagogical approach that leverages digital environments as instruments of learning, without neglecting the humanistic dimension of education. Thus, education for digital wellbeing becomes part of a broader process of self-awareness and self-regulation—core values of learner-centered education.

Primary school pupils are at a stage of intense cognitive and socio-emotional development, during which the digital environment exerts a strong influence on both learning processes and interpersonal relationships. Recent studies show that excessive and unregulated screen use can lead to adverse effects, such as reduced attention span, emotional dysregulation, or decreased interest in offline activities (Twenge & Campbell, 2018; Oberle et al., 2020).

At the same time, when used moderately and guided pedagogically, digital tools can support the development of transversal competences, critical thinking, and creativity (Howard et al., 2022). Therefore, digital wellbeing should not be equated with restriction but with educational balance—the ability to consciously and purposefully integrate technology into the learning process in ways that enhance personal development. According to Catalano (2020), education for digital

wellbeing in primary school should focus on cultivating self-regulation skills and a positive relationship with technology, through learning experiences that promote reflection, cooperation, and responsible communication. These processes are fundamental for developing learning autonomy, one of the key competences defined by the European Commission (2018).

Current approaches to digital balance advocate for a holistic perspective in which the school becomes a formative environment for shaping healthy digital behaviors. UNESCO (2023) emphasizes that digital wellbeing should be embedded transversally within the curriculum, through activities that nurture socio-emotional growth, critical thinking, and empathy in online interactions. In the Romanian pedagogical literature, it is widely recognized that primary education plays a crucial formative role in shaping digital learning habits. Alina Roman (2021) argues that digital education must be tailored to the developmental specificities of young learners, respecting the principles of integral development—cognitive, affective, and moral. Similarly, Stan (2020) stresses the importance of an educational environment that balances digital learning with sensory experiences and direct social interaction. Internationally, Blum-Ross and Livingstone (2021) contend that effective promotion of digital wellbeing does not entail excluding screens from education, but rather redefining their use—transforming them from passive consumption tools into spaces of exploration, collaboration, and creativity. This view resonates with the constructivist perspective advanced by Muşata Bocoş (2013), who argues that active and experiential learning represents the most effective pathway for developing complex competences, including digital ones.

Hence, digital balance becomes a key dimension of life skills education, encouraging pupils to manage their time, attention, and emotions in relation to technology. This direction is supported by the Romanian Ministry of Education (2022), which incorporates aspects of safety, ethics, and responsibility into the national framework for digital competence.

The primary school teacher holds a central role in fostering digital wellbeing, acting as a mediator between pupils, content, and technology. According to (*Albulescu ,2015*), teachers should become “facilitators of the learner’s holistic development within a digitally enriched educational context,” a role that requires pedagogical, technical, and ethical competencies.

Recent studies (Selwyn, 2021; Beetham, 2022) confirm that teachers who consciously integrate digital tools into their instruction help cultivate healthy digital behaviors among pupils. They can guide

children through reflective processes about their screen use and encourage collaborative, digitally mediated activities that enhance empathy and social learning.

In the Romanian context, (Roman A. 2022) highlights the importance of continuous teacher training in order to address the challenges of digitalization in education, advocating for a pedagogical culture based on balance, discernment, and digital ethics. Likewise, Stan (2021) proposes an integrated vision in which the teacher becomes a “coach of digital wellbeing,” promoting a human-centered educational culture rather than one narrowly focused on technical skills.

A review of international and Romanian literature shows that digital wellbeing and balanced screen use are emerging themes in educational sciences, situated at the intersection of pedagogy, psychology, and educational technology. From the perspective of primary education, these concepts gain particular relevance, as early formation of healthy digital behaviors significantly influences long-term social and cognitive development.

International research (Howard et al., 2022; Byrne et al., 2021) demonstrates that educational interventions promoting self-regulation and digital reflection can mitigate the risks associated with prolonged screen exposure. At the same time, Romanian pedagogical scholarship (Bocoș, Albușescu, Catalano, Stan, Roman) emphasizes balance, conscious integration of technology into teaching, and the cultivation of a responsible digital culture.

Consequently, the theoretical framework supports the view that primary school represents the optimal setting for nurturing a culture of digital balance—where pupils’ wellbeing is not the result of restriction, but of education, reflection, and collaboration among all educational actors.

Qualitative research:

Focus Group Study on Teachers’ Perceptions of Digital Wellbeing and Balanced Screen Use in Primary Education

Building upon the theoretical framework outlined above, which highlights the importance of promoting digital wellbeing and balanced screen use in primary education, this qualitative research aimed to explore how these concepts are perceived and implemented by primary school teachers. The study focuses on understanding teachers’ representations, attitudes, and lived experiences related to the integration of digital technology in a balanced and pedagogically meaningful way.

General**aim:**

To investigate how primary school teachers define, interpret, and operationalize the concepts of *digital wellbeing* and *balanced screen use* within the educational context.

Specific objectives:

1. To explore teachers' perceptions of the positive and negative effects of technology use among primary pupils.
2. To identify strategies employed by teachers to promote balanced digital behavior.
3. To highlight barriers and challenges in fostering digital wellbeing at school.
4. To examine how collaboration with families supports or hinders digital wellbeing initiatives.

A focus group method was chosen as the main research approach, suitable for exploring shared meanings, perceptions, and attitudes through guided discussion (Morgan, 1998). This format enabled interactive dialogue among participants and the emergence of authentic perspectives on their teaching practices.

Sample

The study involved two focus groups with a total of 16 participants — primary school teachers from two schools in Arad County, Romania:

- one from an urban area (Arad city);
- one from a rural area (a nearby village).

Participant profile:

- Age: between 27 and 54 years;
- Professional experience: between 3 and 28 years;
- Qualification: primary education teachers;
- Participation in digital competence training: 10 of the 16 teachers.

Participation was voluntary and based on interest in the topic. All participants gave informed consent and remained anonymous. A semi-structured focus group guide was used, including ten open-ended questions that explored teachers' conceptual understanding, classroom practices, and perceived challenges related to digital wellbeing and screen balance. Each session lasted approximately 90 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' permission.

No. Focus Group Question Sample Responses (Summarized)

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| 1 | How would you define <i>digital wellbeing</i> for young pupils? | “It means maintaining a healthy balance between online and offline life.” / “It’s when children feel comfortable and safe using digital |
|---|---|---|

No.	Focus Group Question	Sample Responses (Summarized)
		tools.”
2	What positive effects do you observe from pupils’ use of digital technology?	“Children are more motivated and curious.” / “They learn faster through visuals and interactive tools.”
3	What negative effects have you noticed related to screen overuse?	“Shorter attention span.” / “Sleep problems and reduced social interaction.”
4	How do you encourage balanced screen use during your lessons?	“We alternate digital activities with movement or creative tasks.” / “I set time limits for digital games.”
5	What classroom strategies help promote digital wellbeing?	“Discussions about online safety.” / “Reflection sessions where pupils describe how they feel after screen time.”
6	What difficulties do you face when trying to limit pupils’ screen time?	“Lack of parental control at home.” / “Children’s dependence on entertainment apps.”
7	How do pupils usually respond when you discuss the importance of digital balance?	“Most agree that they feel better after less screen use.” / “Some are resistant and say they can’t live without devices.”
8	How do you perceive parents’ role in supporting digital wellbeing?	“Cooperation is inconsistent—some are very involved, others not at all.” / “Many parents use devices as babysitters.”
9	What type of support or training do you think teachers need in this area?	“Workshops on digital pedagogy.” / “Practical examples on how to teach self-regulation.”
10	In your opinion, what would help schools create a culture of digital wellbeing?	“Clear institutional policies.” / “Partnership between teachers, parents, and students.”

Results and Interpretation

The qualitative data were analyzed thematically, and five major themes emerged from the discussions. The following table summarizes the key results and interpretations:

Theme	Main Findings (Synthesis)	Interpretation
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1. Understanding of Digital Wellbeing	Most teachers associate digital wellbeing with balance, control, and emotional comfort. Some consider it a new concept still insufficiently understood.	Confirms theoretical perspectives (Livingstone & Helsper, 2019) emphasizing self-regulation and conscious digital engagement.
2. Perceived Effects of Screen Use	Teachers observe both benefits (motivation, engagement) and drawbacks (distraction, fatigue).	Reflects global findings (Twenge & Campbell, 2018) — the quality and context of use matter more than duration.
3. Pedagogical Practices for Digital Balance	Teachers alternate digital and physical activities, organize “no-screen days,” and discuss online safety.	Aligns with Romanian pedagogical views (Bocoş, 2017; Roman, 2021) advocating experiential and active learning.
4. Barriers and Challenges	Insufficient parental involvement, limited resources, lack of training, and social pressure for constant connectivity.	Supports Albuлесcu (2015) and Roman (2022), who stress the need for continuous teacher education and family partnership.
5. School–Family Collaboration	Teachers value cooperation with parents but describe it as inconsistent.	Echoes Catalano (2020) and Stan (2021): digital wellbeing must be co-constructed by school and family.

Overall, the focus group results reveal that teachers perceive digital wellbeing as a relevant but evolving concept in primary education. They are aware of the dual nature of digital technology — both as a valuable learning resource and as a potential source of distraction or dependency.

While teachers demonstrate creativity in integrating digital tools, they also express a need for institutional guidance and professional

development to manage technology more effectively in class. The results confirm the growing awareness of the importance of balance and the need for a holistic approach involving the entire educational community.

Furthermore, participants emphasized that family collaboration is critical: without consistent home support, digital wellbeing initiatives at school remain limited. This confirms the literature advocating a shared responsibility model (UNESCO, 2023; Catalano, 2020).

Partial Conclusions

This qualitative focus group study provides a detailed insight into how Romanian primary teachers conceptualize and apply the idea of digital wellbeing. The findings indicate:

- increasing awareness and concern about balanced digital use;
- diversity of practices but lack of systematic strategies;
- need for professional development in digital pedagogy;
- importance of stronger school–family cooperation.

These conclusions will serve as the foundation for the next stage of the research — the quantitative phase and the formulation of pedagogical recommendations for embedding digital wellbeing into the Romanian primary education system.

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