



A CHILDREN'S FESTIVAL DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract:

The DESECE Children's Festival was launched in 2010 at the Department of Educational Sciences and Early Childhood Education (DESECE) of the University of Patras. It is organised annually by the DESECE students in collaboration with their professors and comprises a variety of educational and creative workshops for children of a preschool age. To date, it has hosted over 10,000 children, and 300 institutions and schools, and has expanded its activities into other areas as well, such as teacher training. In 2020, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and in order to support the children, parents and teachers, the Children's Festival sought alternative ways of carrying out the event, creating online activities and a thirty-hour virtual festival over five days. This unprecedented experience offered great satisfaction to the Festival's Organising Committee, which managed the crisis, and to the volunteer students, who improved their digital skills and gained experience in e-learning. At the same time, it offered the possibility to people, both in Greece and abroad, to participate in the event, which until then had been limited to local society.

Keywords: children's festival, educational department, virtual events, COVID-19 pandemic

1. Introduction

Humanity's history is characterised by the organisation of events through which people have sought to celebrate and give meaning to important happenings in their lives (Bowdin et al., 2006, p. 4). Consequently, the story of events through time is long; they began in antiquity as religious festivals, playing a determining social role in public and private life, and evolved into recurrent annual public events of a limited duration around a subject. However, over the years their number, variety and popularity have increased, meaning that their purpose has changed: from celebrating a happening, many events

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today are organised to generate economic development and profits for the location where they are held (Getz, 2008; Quinn, 2005). The countless events that now take place daily at a local, national or international level whetted the academic community's research interest in their political, religious, social, economic and cultural repercussions. According to Donald Getz (2008), research on events began in the 1960s and 1970s and began to flourish in the 1990s and especially after 2000 when the term "event studies" was coined. Over this period of time, many different disciplines became interested in the study of events, first and foremost anthropology, geography, tourism and economics. Indeed, in recent years research has been carried out to highlight their educational character (Jensen & Buckley, 2014; Karlsen, 2007; Mitsakou & Riga, 2020; Papagiannopoulou, 2018; Riga, 2012; Snell, 2005).

Festivals constitute a particular category of events and have been organised for thousands of years as important components of mankind's cultural life. Due to their great variety and their particular characteristics, they are studied individually (Cudny, 2014) by different disciplines, such as anthropology and sociology (Getz, 2010, p. 4), comparative religion, social psychology and folklore (Falassi, 1987, p. 2). The first festival, in a different form from today's, dates back to 534 BC and was a celebration in honour of Dionysus, the god of wine (as mentioned in Quinn, 2005, p. 929). Today, festivals are defined as periodically recurrent social events or social constructs that vary from area to area, and over time (Getz, 2010, p. 7) and in which participate, directly or indirectly and to various degrees, all members of a whole community, united by ethnic, linguistic, religious, historical bonds and sharing a worldview (Falassi, 1987, p. 2). These are public thematic celebrations that take place regularly, usually in the same place and within a predetermined period of time. They are linked to a local community's religion, art or culture (Cudny, Korec, & Rouba, 2012, p. 709), while some define them as a "political act" that helps constitute individual feelings of belonging, or not, to the festival community (Duffy & Mair, 2018, p. 52). Each festival has its own object and its own programme, which is composed of pleasurable activities, entertainment or events publicly celebrating some concept, happening or fact (Janiskee, 1980, p. 97) and usually promotes products, values and various forms of art. The value of this institution lies in the fact that it encourages community members to reflect upon and continue their culture's history and traditions, while also providing them with the opportunity to escape the routines of their everyday lives, have novel experiences, satisfy their curiosity and be with the people who are enjoying themselves (as mentioned in Hede & Rentschler, 2007, p. 157).

In the international literature, we find many different studies that examine the influence of festivals either on culture and society through the prism of anthropological and sociological research (Getz, Andersson, & Carlsen, 2010; Gursoy, Kim, & Uysal, 2004), or on the economy and the development of tourism, or which focus on issues regarding the organisation and management of festivals that concern subjects such as marketing or even geography (Cudny, Korec, & Rouba, 2012). While research in anthropology explains that people's desire and need for interaction lead them to organising such events, studies focusing on the financial/economic advantages of festivals mainly centre on the assumption that financial/economic gains are one of the

primary reasons for organising such events. And this is because, on the one hand, the existence of a festival attracts visitors and tourists who spend money on travel, accommodation, food, participation and contribute to the local market thriving (Cudny, 2014; Saayman & Saayman, 2006) and, on the other, contributes to an increase of jobs in the area and a change in local society's income (Bowdin et al., 2006; Felsenstein & Fleischer, 2003).

Recently, the focus has stopped being solely on festivals' economic impact and their participation in tourism, research is now also being oriented towards their social consequences (Gursoy, Kim, & Uysal, 2004; Reid, 2004; Small, Edwards, & Sheridan, 2005; Wood, 2005) on a personal and a community level (Jaeger & Mykletun, 2013). On a personal level, the social impact concerns the individual's quality of life, employment/job prospects, acquisition of new skills, personal satisfaction about participating and their interaction with other people (Reid, 2004). Specifically, Sacha Reid (2004) mentions that participating in the planning and organisation of events leads to learning new skills, which people can then apply to other aspects of their lives and in their community.

At the community level, events of this sort contribute to the development of individual and local identity (Karlsen, 2007) and the emergence of local pride and positive identity (De Bres & Davis, 2001), thus building strong bonds within the community. Furthermore, they contribute to a change in the region's perception both within and outside the community (Quinn, 2005, p. 940), promote the town and the region (Cudny, 2014; Cudny, Korec, & Rouba, 2012), make the local area more visible by attracting people and promote social interaction between all members of the host community and its visitors. Indeed, Frisby and Getz (1989, p. 10) recommend to organisers that *"the festival theme and name should capitalize on environmental trends and the sociocultural history of the host community to facilitate marketing efforts."* All these outcomes serve to build community cohesiveness and create social incentives for the inhabitants and firms (Gursoy, Kim, & Uysal, 2004; Jaeger & Mykletun, 2013). One point of convergence among the researchers studying their social outcomes is that festivals symbolically show a community which events are of particular importance in its life, but also highlight the fact that when local society celebrates something in essence it is extolling its very existence (see more in Gursoy, Kim, & Uysal, 2004).

However, except for positive impacts, festivals also produce negative externalities, such as traffic congestion, pollution, landscape change, and ecosystem disruption (Felsenstein & Fleischer, 2003, p. 386), parking problems, rubbish in the area, as well as emissions and waste (Guttridge-Hewitt, 2020). Additionally, the organisation of such events can also result in more serious social issues, such as crime and vandalism. Also, festivals may be very successful in creating a sense of belonging among the dominant group, but they also comprise the possibility that other parties (e.g. migrant and diasporic groups) may feel excluded (as mentioned in Duffy & Mair, 2021, p. 15). Indeed, a more critical approach to the research showed that festival organisers still have a long way to go to meet social inclusion goals (Bossey, 2020; Laing & Mair, 2015). Finally, there are also cultural repercussions stemming from the arrival of a great number of visitors, such as

the commoditisation of culture, which can even go as far as the destruction of cultural heritage (as mentioned in Small, Edwards, & Sheridan, 2005, p. 67).

An important characteristic of organised festivals is that they are a *spatial-temporal phenomenon* (Getz, 2008, p. 404). This means that much of their appeal emanates from the fact that they never offer an identical experience, that one has to be present to enjoy what goes on, engaging the senses to explore the event (Duffy & Mair, 2018) and be focused on the joy of the immersive, large-crowd experience (Rentschler & Lee, 2021, p. 38). With the advent of COVID-19, however, we were faced with unprecedented circumstances, which changed all the stable facts we knew about the organisation of mass events, as well as the main reason for organising them. Public gatherings and large assemblies were banned, physical contact with other people curtailed, travel was reduced, financial resources collapsed, while new concepts were adopted around the world, such as self-isolation, physical distancing, social distancing, curfew, lockdown and quarantine. One of the sectors that were particularly affected was the organisation of events, considered one of the biggest sources of transmission of infectious diseases (Ishola & Phin, 2011). As of March 2020, all kinds of events around the world, whether cultural, business-related, technological, sporting or major events such as the Olympic Games, were cancelled, postponed or rescheduled with a great financial and social impact (Gössling, Scott, & Hall, 2021; McCloskey et al., 2020; Mohanty, Himanshi, & Choudhury, 2020; Nhamo, Dube, & Chikodzi, 2020; Ozili & Arun, 2020). At the same time, all levels of education in more than 160 countries were suspended (UNESCO, 2020).

Despite the global shock, in a very short period of time educational institutions adopted alternative forms of (distance) education, in some cases with successful results (Aristovnik et al., 2020) and in others not (Owusu-Fordjour, Koomson, & Hanson, 2020), while a number of events and festivals around the world sought to offer alternative services through digital platforms and online activities in order to maintain their audience and mission (Jeske, Kaelin, & Nielsen, 2021). The world relied on technology to be able to learn, stay connected with family, friends and colleagues, live. More specifically, according to Rentschler and Lee (2021), three trends/changes were identified in the organisation of arts festivals so as to ensure their survival, but also to demonstrate new ways of working and monetising the digital turn. The first concerns localism, where national and international festivals turned to local tourism and the participation of local artists. The second concerns a shift from competition to collaboration among artists, institutions and other festivals, and the third corresponds to a digital transformation so as to promote them via online live performances.

The above changes may not be unprecedented, but they were accelerated by the advent of COVID-19. Already, over the last 20 years, as Duffy and Mair (2021) characteristically mention, virtual or hybrid events have seen the light, the former taking place lives online in live streaming, without face-to-face contact with the audience, and the latter incorporating virtual elements into a live event. Also, the concept of "*networked event*" (introduced by Lazzaro and Wawrzynek in 2001 to designate a performance comprising a number of musicians, in different physical locations, who interact thanks to an internet connection) was adopted by many groups around the world during the

pandemic. And, naturally, we should mention developments in hardware and software designed to facilitate more efficient and effective ways of experiencing a virtual festival, as well as developments in social media and digital marketing, which provide platforms for user-generated content and the personalisation of experiences (Duffy & Mair, 2021, p. 12).

This article presents a case study of the Children's Festival of the Department of Educational Sciences and Early Childhood Education (DESECE)ⁱⁱ of the University of Patras, in Western Greece. The case of this festival is of particular interest as it is organised by a public institution and is not profit-driven. Its functioning relies exclusively on volunteers and one of its key objectives is the participants' informal learning and training. Its workshops' subject matter means they are original compared to the standard recreational workshops proposed at children's festivals. This festival has a great impact on both local society and the university community, resulting in its rapid growth: although it started functioning on a pilot basis in 2010 with two workshops and very few participating children, to date it has hosted over 10,000 children, organised 150 workshops and trained around 1,500 students in how to organise such events.

2. The case of the DESECE Children's Festival

The DESECE Children's Festival is organised every year at the beginning of summer, before schools close, and lasts five days. It is addressed to preschool children (3-7 years old), who visit it either with their parents or with their school. The DESECE students are responsible for organising it and, with the help of their teachers, invent original and creative activities based on the knowledge they have acquired in the course of their studies. These workshops bring together movement, art, science, speech and culture (Mitsakou & Riga, 2020). Their subject matter is varied and covers a wide range of disciplines, such as, among others, the visual arts, mathematics, the natural sciences, literature, physical activity and play, music and traditional rhythms, dramatization, robotics, children's rights, and intercultural education. The workshops are organised with the aim of familiarising the children-visitors with new concepts and experimenting with different materials and constructions through play. Because the Festival's environment acts as a space of informal learning for the children-visitors (Karlsen, 2007; Mitsakou & Riga, 2020; Papagiannopoulou, 2018; Scott et al., 2007), special attention is paid to the workshops' content and the festival's overall organisation, so that the children's experience from participating in it is valuable and respects their needs and their own world.

Apart from the children-visitors, the DESECE Children's Festival functions as a space of informal learning for adults, too. The teachers accompanying the children attend the workshops, discover new techniques and ideas for carrying out similar activities in their classrooms, and are trained indirectly and informally in contemporary educational

ⁱⁱ More information about the DESECE Children's Festival is available on its website <https://childrenfestival.gr/en/>

trends. In the evaluation questionnaires that they complete each year at the end of their visit, they invariably mention the possibility they are given to observe their pupils' behaviour in a different environment, but also to meet and talk with other colleagues. For them, the Festival resembles an annual teachers' get-together at the end of the school year that takes the form of an informal summer party.

Another category of adults who benefit even more from the Festival's space of informal learning is that the volunteer students who organise the workshops. Their voluntary participation offers them the opportunity to experiment and put into practice all they have been taught during their studies, collaborate among themselves, take on responsibilities, interact with the children, modify/alter their pedagogical stance and improve their professional skills. Along with the students, the faculty members themselves for a while pass from the theoretical approach to knowledge to a hands-on experience of daily practice and the application of knowledge. Given that a festival's success depends to a large extent on the volunteers' consistent participation and their proper preparation for this role (Hede & Rentschler, 2007, p. 157), all of the volunteer students attend a seminar on the animation of extra-curricular educational activities.

The overall responsibility of planning and organising the Festival rests with the seven-member Organising Committee (OC), which is composed of six students and a professor and works for ten months towards successfully carrying out the event. The responsibilities of the OC's members, the monthly meetings and the topics of the meetings are determined as of the beginning of the academic year. There are specific objectives to be achieved each month and all decisions are recorded in the meetings' minutes. Each member of the OC has specific responsibilities although they all work as a team. The meetings are held in an atmosphere that encourages freedom of speech, and new ideas, but also the critical evaluation of actions. This arrangement, which is also recommended by other researchers (Scott et al., 2007, pp. 24-25), enables the OC to manage all issues and unforeseen events in a timely, quick and efficient manner. Research conducted on other forms of informal learning offered by the Festival (Mitsakou & Riga, 2020) shows that, through the ten-month volunteer work, the OC members familiarise themselves with a set of knowledge and acquire skills in various areas, such as the administrative and financial management of events, communication, office organisation, time management, problem-solving, decision making, human resource management, the elaboration of strategies to achieve goals and the evaluation of results.

Lastly, DESECE itself and the University undertake a social role in local society by covering the Festival's costs and offering citizens free access to this event, an important element that, as Duffy and Mair argue (2018, p. 60), makes the Festival more inclusive and accessible to a wider audience. In this way, bridges are built and bonds are created (Riga, 2012) between children, teachers, parents, schools, students and the University.

To conclude, during the first ten years of the Festival's existence we tried to strategically develop many of the management areas for its sustainability, which according to the literature are often neglected (Getz, 2010, p. 21) and are key contributors to an event's instability. Such areas include funding, the quality control of activities, innovation, safety, providing for unpredictable weather conditions, the volunteer-

students' professional development, evaluation methods and advertising. For instance, we tried to keep the core funding from the University stable, develop a network of sponsors and compile a good practice guide to instruct students when seeking sponsorships. We elaborated a training programme for volunteer students and thought of ways to reward their participation (e.g. a volunteering certificate). We took advantage of the useless and natural material on the University premises, using it to reduce costs at the same time as passing on to the children the message of recycling and the respect for the environment. Finally, in order to control the quality of the Festival's activities, we elaborated a multiple evaluation system for the visitors (children and adults), the volunteer students, the professors and the OC.

3. The advent of the pandemic

For a decade, the Children's Festival functioned smoothly, managing the unpredictable and any difficulties that arose efficiently. However, the advent of the pandemic in early 2020 was an unprecedented situation for all of us. The OC found itself in the difficult position of renouncing its plans for the Festival, as in most countries at the time all events had been cancelled and schools had been closed. Initially, the students' disappointment was tremendous. But, as Karalis (2020) points out, during a crisis the most important element is the creation of a Crisis Management Team, where the composition of the team and its levels of expertise will largely determine the success of the crisis response plan. This role was played by the OC, which, despite lacking the expertise of confronting a crisis, was forced to face the challenge by reinventing itself. Via online meetings, the OC's members launched a process of re-examining how the Festival could function with the use of technology. During the first year of the pandemic, in 2020, they designed activities and games for the children and uploaded them to the Festival's websiteⁱⁱⁱ. They informed all the teachers who had visited the Festival over the ten previous years of its in-person functioning about the activities' free use during the period of the children's distance learning. At the same time, they announced this initiative to groups of parents and teachers on the internet in order to support their efforts to occupy their children creatively. This initiative provided the impetus to enrich the Festival's website, which now adopted an active and important role in the children's education well beyond the mere informational role it had served in the past.

Although the above solution proposed by the OC had nothing to do with the original Festival and the experiences gained by the visitors and volunteer students, contemporary literature appears to confirm that, in order for an event to survive after a crisis, it is important to demonstrate a quick reaction, flexibility (Rentschler & Lee, 2021) and to introduce new elements so that it remains attractive (Laing & Frost, 2015) and resilient (Miles & Shipway, 2020). In fact, as Karalis (2020, p. 133) characteristically states, in crisis situations *"the quickness of response is more important than the quality of the solutions"*.

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://childrenfestival.gr/en/ergastiria/>

The pandemic, however, remained with us the following year (in 2021), schools opened and closed periodically and most events remained inactive. In this context and after numerous online meetings, we realised that the only way for the Festival to continue would be for it to become virtual. At this point, further questions and difficulties arose. The idea of holding the Festival via a platform (e.g. Zoom) was rejected due to the difficulties that the children might encounter in terms of connecting and handling it, and because of personal data issues (use of a camera by an underage population). The only safe choice was for the Festival to be held via livestreaming on its channel on YouTube,^{iv} although we were concerned that the children would not be able to engage in meaningful interaction with the volunteer students for the workshops to be more interactive.

However, the new OC,^v which again took on the role of Crisis Management Team, had no expertise in organising a virtual event and for this reason, turned to a company that would undertake the entire production. The production company provided the technical support and the management of the livestreaming during the all-live virtual Festival workshops and at the end of each day uploaded to the Children's Festival channel the whole event for on-demand viewing, so that we might also cover time zones in other countries. The volunteer students who wanted to experiment with this new form of festival were invited to a distance training by the director in charge of the company, who was now a permanent member of the Crisis Management Team. With his assistance, we elaborated an overall strategy and vision for the design of the virtual Festival: we informed the volunteer students about issues concerning the photograph, music and video rights, the manner in which they could involve the children in their workshops even if there was no face-to-face contact, the duration of the activities, the use of materials that children could easily find in their school or home, the creation of an enthusiastic atmosphere even if through a screen. In order to keep the children's interest alive, the workshops lasted around 5-10 minutes and the theatre performances 10-20 minutes.

The whole production was designed to allow a wide range of audiences to participate, from schools, teachers and children in local society through to families at home in Greece and abroad. The Festival's programme began at 10:00 in the morning and ended at 16:00 in the afternoon, from Monday through to Friday. Every thirty minutes a workshop, an activity or an event started. The topics were varied and ranged from musical stories, intercultural scenarios, human rights stories, storytelling, drama, puppet theatre, origami, movement games, gymnastics, folk songs and dances, and crafts/constructions through to experiments, maths and robotics. The event was promoted through targeted correspondence and by sending the digital programme to all the schools and institutions that had participated in the Festival in the past. In addition, we published the event on social networks, educational websites and teacher groups. It should be stressed that Facebook and Instagram were the most powerful platforms for promoting the event. During the week when the Festival was held, over 2,500 unique

^{iv} <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCUtQIciFYEs3LOHdF5RWiDw/featured>

^v Every year, the members of the OC are renewed.

users followed the event, while over the same period of time the Festival's channel attracted 200 new subscribers.

The overall endeavour was crowned by success in terms of both the participants and the volunteer students, and the OC. Immediately after the event came to a close, the evaluation process began and various suggestions were made for the future, many of which have already been adopted, chief among them the Festival's contribution to teachers' professional development through the organisation of webinars on educational practices that can be incorporated into their daily practice. It was also suggested that a future virtual presentation of the Festival should include a friendly virtual evaluation of the event.

4. Discussion

The experience throughout the world of the pandemic's advent was a powerful stress test for educational systems, at the same time as being an opportunity for the development of alternative education opportunities (OECD, 2020). The DESECE Children's Festival seized this opportunity and was able to develop online alternatives, upgrade its online services and reduce the risks that could threaten it in the future due to meteorological, financial, public health or other circumstances. The virtual Festival attracted a greater number and a broader spectrum of visitors than the usual face-to-face Festival. It acquired new "followers" and a series of educational videos that anyone can watch and which are now educational material in courses for DESECE students and training material for future volunteer students of the Festival.

The advent of the pandemic enabled us, on the one hand, to explore and develop recovery and crisis management strategies, i.e. develop what Hugues Seraphin (2021) calls an ambidextrous management approach. The adoption of ambidextrous management can contribute to many benefits for the event, such as, among others, its sustainability, innovation, increased social capital, improved motivation and performance of staff, and customer loyalty. On the other hand, the successful management of the crisis is also due to the fact that the OC was not just "a group of people but really a team", an important factor in crisis management according to Karalis (2020, p. 131). The OC's members had already been working together for a year and had developed very good interpersonal relations, with each of them having clearly-defined duties and an area of responsibility.

Another positive impact of organising the virtual Festival is that the volunteer students experienced the flexibility offered to them by technology to videotape their work again and again and constantly improve it, something they would have been unable to do during a live event. They included these videos in their portfolio along with their degree when applying for work. Additionally, their participation in the Festival allowed them to learn new digital and other skills that they can apply in various aspects of their lives. As for the children who participated in the virtual Festival, they were given the opportunity to watch their favourite fairy tale over and over again or redo an activity they enjoyed. Lastly, for those who had not known about the Children's Festival and

DESECE, it was an alternative way to get to know us and realise that an early childhood education department is not only about teaching and research, but is active in other domains too.

Obviously, a virtual event cannot emulate the interaction, socialisation or entertainment such as those of a live happening. But many agree (Davies, 2021; Duffy & Mair, 2021; Getz, 2007, p. 377; Seraphin, 2021) that virtual events will become more frequent and more significant in response to advances in global technology, globalisation, economic costs, social distance, and the risks of travel. Advances in technology and communications are now shaping the field of events, too, offering a variety of solutions that allow us to experience, at least in part, some of the elements of festive happenings. For instance, conference centres are now designed as spaces for both live and virtual events in order to reach a global audience. But in any case, virtual events will be complementary and will not be able to replace the experience of live events, which meet fundamental human needs. According to Karen Davies (2021), in the future, these events will rely on and be run by communities (real or virtual), without intermediaries, agencies and ticketing platforms, and will be motivated only by the promotion of art and not by financial gain.

However, beyond the assistance technology offers to us, we cannot overlook the fact that the cancellation of most festivals and public events and the mandated confinement brought into sharp focus, as Duffy and Mair (2021, p. 18) point out, the importance of a range of intangible concepts such as belonging, togetherness and *communitas*, and we reassessed the importance of just being with other people. Because these events, as also evidenced through their historical review, have always been about coming together and strengthening our social identity.

5. Conclusion

The present study is an evaluation of the implementation of a virtual children's festival with the ultimate goal of creating a future system of crisis preparedness and management, which up to now had not been taken into consideration to this extent. Until two years ago, the DESECE Children's Festival had elaborated strategies to manage unforeseen meteorological conditions, limited funding, or a lackadaisical attitude on behalf of the volunteer students. Today, after two years of living with the pandemic, we have become more flexible and adaptable to change, developing new skills and new perspectives. The positive response of the volunteer students, of the OC and of the schools that attended the virtual Festival, as well as the opportunity we were given to approach a new audience and, what is more, now on an international level, are powerful elements for us to consider in the future. Possibly, a hybrid format of the Children's Festival combining the live event with its virtual presentation will be a new challenge for us. Of course, every new challenge contains obstacles that need to be overcome, such as the personal data of an underage population visiting the Festival live, for example, but we have now learnt that there are alternative solutions to every obstacle.

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