

The Teachers' Opinion about Online Learning Process for Children with Special Educational Needs

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Abstract

Keywords:

barriers; solutions; strategies; special educational needs; online environment.

Communication in the online environment represents a real evolution for the whole society, hence for the educational system but because the whole change took place in a short span of time, the education has faced an unencountered challenge up to now. Component of the informational society, the educational dynamic and open system promotes nowadays ways of achieving the instructional educational process, offering to the teacher a multitude of organisational and functional variants. However, in the case of children with special educational needs, there are many barriers in the way of achieving their right to education in the virtual space. The present study consisted of achieving an inquiry-based questionnaire, applied to the teaching staff who works in inclusive education centres and to those who have students with different deficiencies and special educational needs in their class. The results of the study highlight both the difficulties and the opportunities of achieving a didactic activity in the online environment for students with special educational needs.

Zusammenfassung

Schlüsselworte:

Schranken; Lösungen; Strategien; sonderpädagogische Förderbedarf; Online-Umgebung

Die Online-Kommunikation stellt für der gesamten Gesellschaft einen wirklichen Vorschrift dar, somit auch für das Bildungswesen, aber aufgrund der Tatsache, dass der gesamte Wandel in kurzer Zeit stattfand, stand das Lehrwesen vor einer noch nie dagewesenen Herausforderung. Teil der informatisierten Gesellschaft, bietet ein dynamisches und offenes Bildungssystem den Lehrkräften eine Vielzahl von organisatorischen und funktionalen Möglichkeiten, um den instruktiv-pädagogischen Prozess zu erfüllen. Trotzdem, bei Kindern mit sonderpädagogischem Förderbedarf bestehen jedoch im virtuellen Raum mehrere Schranken im Weg der Umsetzung des Rechts auf Bildung. Die vorliegende Studie bestand in der Durchführung einer Befragung auf Grundlage eines Fragebogens, der bei Lehrkräften, die in inklusiven Bildungszentren arbeiten, als auch bei denen, wo in den Klassen Personen einen sonderpädagogischem Förderbedarf, auf Grund verschiedener Defizite, benötigen, angewendet wurde. Die Ergebnisse der Studie verdeutlichen sowohl die Schwierigkeiten als auch die Möglichkeiten der Online-Lehre für Studierende mit sonderpädagogischem Förderbedarf.

1. Introduction

The online development of the educational process during the period marked by the Covid-19 crisis has highlighted numerous problems/difficulties to which the educational system in Romania and other systems were forced to deal with. "Online school has represented and still represents a challenge for all those involved in the educational process moreover for the students with special educational needs, both at macro-system and micro-system. Passing from face-to-face teaching to the online education has supposed to model on the emergency requirements but also a didactic turning point in the approach of learning activities for students with SED" (Cazacu, 2021, <https://www.sipgalati.ro/2021/07/30/scoala-online-onoua-provocare-pentru-elevii-cu-ces/>).

2. Theoretical foundation

In the last two decades, the Romanian education system has encouraged the idea of an inclusive society, based on the value of the individual uniqueness and his/her bio-psychic characteristics. Prevention and combatting marginalization and social exclusion constitute the main objectives of the Romanian education system in order to offer a quality education to children with special educational needs, to retrieve the multitude of difficulties encountered by them and to facilitate their socio-professional integration.

2.1. Inclusive education- conceptual frame

"Inclusive education – type of basic education on the paradigm *education for all* highlighting the need

for the educational system, schools/kindergartens to change and adapt continuously in order to answer to the children's diversity and their educational needs. The main characteristics of inclusive education are: a) supports and confirms that all children can learn and they need a support for their learning; b) pursues to identify and minimize the learning barriers; c) is larger than common formal education containing: education for family, for community, other education opportunities beside school; d) supposes change of attitudes, behaviours, curriculum which should satisfy the children's diversity, including those with special educational needs (SEN); e) it is a dynamic process which develops continuously according to culture and context; f) it is part of the development strategy of an inclusive society. Thus, the inclusive education becomes the type of education responsible for the assurance of the right to education of all children without discrimination and especially ensuring a quality education" (Bocoș, Răduț-Taciuc & Stan, 2016, pp. 39-40). "The training of teachers for inclusive school becomes a necessity of the present time. The complexity and diversity of educational needs of the pupils require, from the part of the school, adequate answers, meant to facilitate the access of all pupils to education, preventing and eliminating the risk of exclusion and/or social marginalisation. (...) The inclusive education highlights the valorisation of the existing differences between pupils, the development of the maximal potential everyone disposes of" (Ispas, 2019).

2.2. *The new technologies – solutions in the teaching process of deficient children*

The continuous progress of information technology has contributed to the improvement of learning quality, the teaching staff having the possibility to approach new perspectives and the students to access new learning opportunities (Brahim et al., 2013). The potential detained by e-learning in reducing the learning barriers for people with special educational needs is very optimistic (Fichten et al., 2009). An adequate technology is necessary to offer the students with disabilities some learning experiences adapted to their needs which should satisfy the needs of every type of disability in other words centred on the student and personalised. Furthermore, they should improve considerably the satisfaction, speed of learning and their learning efficiency.

Currently, some web pages bring a significant benefit in the learning process of disabled students. Worldwide, the internet, with a series of applications and platforms that disabled people can use, has a great potential to create new means of communication and relating in online communities. The benefits offered by the Internet world for the students with special educational needs are different according to the disability they have (Bühler & Fisseler, 2007). For example, for a person whose disability limits the move in the physical setting, the internet has the capacity to enlarge his/her knowledge and the interaction sphere in the online environment. In this way, they can have access to a series of workshops/webinars/virtual learning classes (Jaeger, 2012, pp. 3-5).

Assisted or empowered technology includes devices, instruments, hardware or software which partially allow the disabled people to use the computer. These present an alternative way to access the content of a screen, to use the computer or to process data. The specific adjustment software or devices for the computer manipulation include (Arrigo, 2005):

- Screen reading software (the displayed text speaks and allows for the simulation of actions of the mouse with the keyboard);
- Software to increase the screen (in order to increase the content of the screen);
- Braille display (for the display of Braille letters);
- Devices for alternative entrance (for example, screen keyboard) and special keyboard (in order to facilitate the introduction of data);
- Improvement of the keyboard and accelerators (such as StickKeys, Mousekeys, repeatKeys, SlowKeys, BounceKeys or Tog-gleKey);

Indicating alternative devices, such as a mouse which can be dealt with the foot, an indicator device mounted on the head or monitoring systems of the eyes (Douce, Porch & Cooper, 2010).

3. Research methodology

The purpose of the research consists in highlighting the difficulties and opportunities to achieve the instructional-educational act in the online environment for students with special educational needs. In accordance with the proposed aim, the research was focused on the following objectives:

- assigning the advantages as an outcome of applying learning strategies in the context of online school;
- the identification of the platforms used in the instruction of the students with special educational needs, in the online environment;
- enumerating of the barriers faced by the teaching staff in the context of online school;
- highlighting the feelings/states experienced by the teachers who work with students with different types of deficiencies.

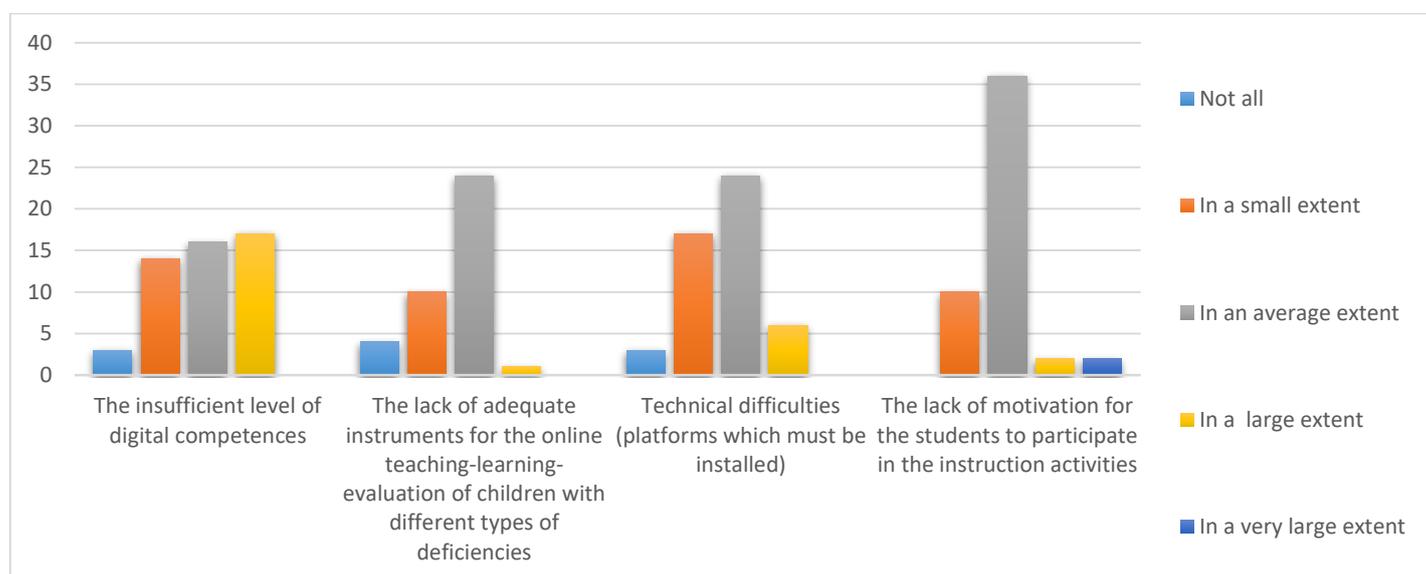
The research is based on the development of an inquiry-based questionnaire, applied to a sample of 50 teaching staff: a number of 40 (80%) of the participants are teachers who activate in centres of inclusive education and 10 (20%) have children with deficiencies in their class. Based on the received answers, we present the typology of these deficiencies: communication and relating disorders 27 (48%); language disorders - 9 (18%); sensorial deficiencies - 8 (16%); mental deficiencies - 5 (10%); physical deficiencies - 2 (4%); autism - 2 (4%). Most of the teaching staff come from the urban area, more precisely 78%, while the percentage of those who come from the rural area is 22%. The method of inquiry represents “a research method of interactive and extensive type, which supposes a direct exchange of information between the researcher and the subjects under investigation” (Bocoș, 2020, p. 43). The inquiry-based questionnaire involves “data collection (opinions, facts, educational needs, interests, motivations, desires, aspirations etc.) regarding certain issues, themes, situations, processes or educational phenomena of interest” (ibidem).

We used the technique of indirect inquiry. Respondents expressed their answers in written form via an online Google Forms questionnaire. The questions addressed to the respondents (14 in number) had different structures. According to the content, there were opinion questions, aiming subjective aspects (opinions, attitudes, expectations, limits of the educational process achieved in the online environment). As answers are concerned, there were closed questions which “allow only to choose a variant of answer according to the opinion of the questioned subject, from more possible variants of answer, explained and imbedded in the questionnaire” and open questions which “solicit the subjects to build answers in the desired manner (they are not restricted) and subsequently, their most accurate and complete registration” (Bocoș, 2020, p. 46).

4. Results

The results of the study highlight both the difficulties and the opportunities of conducting a didactic activity in the online environment achieved with the students with special educational needs. For 17% of the teachers participating in the study, the lack of adequate instruments for the online teaching-learning-evaluation of children with different types of deficiencies and the insufficient level of digital competences are elements which have hindered in a large extent the optimal achievement of the online instructional-educational process. The barriers that the teaching staff have encountered in their teaching the children with special educational needs, in the context of online school were the following:

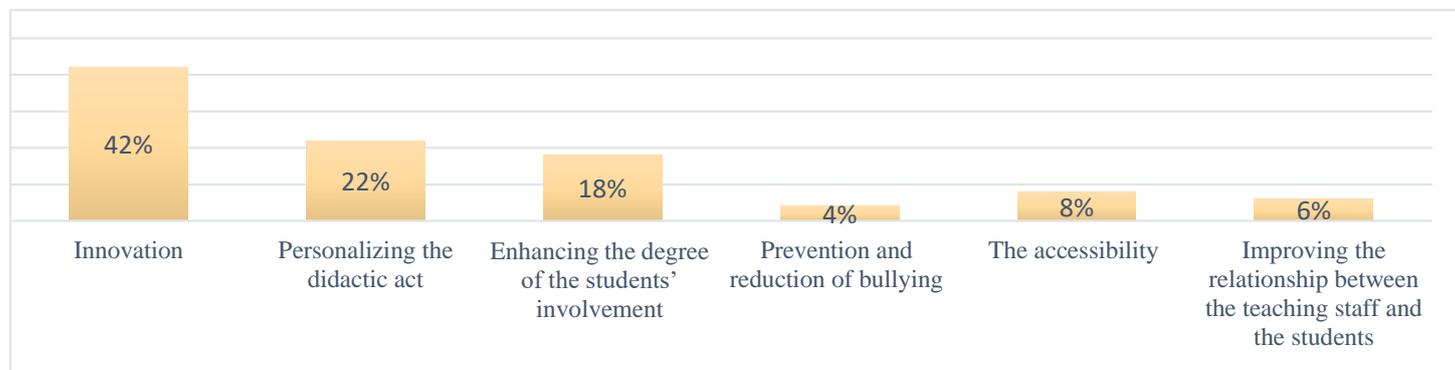
Figure 1. Barriers in online teaching



However, despite the barriers encountered due to the suspension of face-to-face meetings between the teachers and the students, most of the teaching staff (21%) consider that the online school has represented a real opportunity to innovate the education. The

advantages of applying psycho-pedagogical intervention strategies in the context of online school identified and prioritised by the teaching staff participating in the study are shown in the figure below

Figure 2. Advantages of online activities

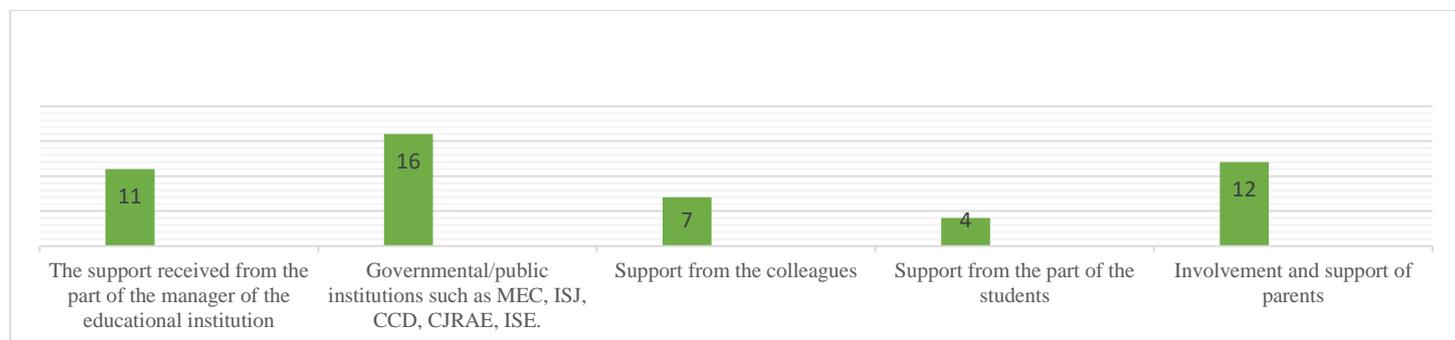


Most of the teaching staff have used applications destined exclusively to online learning. Concomitantly, some applications were used for asynchronous communication in group through different social networks. The Google Classroom platform was used most frequently by the teaching staff (26 mentions); communication on the socializing networks and telephones (call and text message) was

mentioned by 12 teachers; Zoom platform was mentioned by 10 teachers; platform eTwinning was used by 2 teachers.

In this period of lack of face-to-face activity, the findings of the study conclude that the participants have benefitted from support and guidance, as follows:

Figure 3. Support and guidance for teaching staff



The results of the quantitative analysis are supported by the qualitative analysis of answers which describes the impediments of online education for children with special educational needs during the pandemic: *"They can't focus adequately and I can't help them from behind a screen!"*; *"For the children with severe or associated deficiencies, it is very difficult to achieve the instructional educational process and the recovery process from several reasons: the attention deficit which is disturbed by many external factors; the lack of socialization extremely important for these children, lack of motivation, lack of contact with concrete didactic object-materials"*; *"The recovery therapies were done with great difficulty"*, *"The lack of digital equipment for students and the lack of active*

participation of parents in the framework of online school". On the other side, the teachers consider that despite the low preparation level in computer assisted instruction, online school gave them the possibility *"to innovate the didactic strategies, to personalise and centre on the student the contents taught and last but not least, to collaborate, to achieve partnerships and to exchange good practices with other colleagues by means of virtual groups"*.

5. Conclusions and discussions

The study was conducted after coming back to face-to-face learning, which facilitated an introspective analysis, the study constituting an objective radiography of the limits and the new opportunities regarding the online achievement of the

educational process for the students with special educational needs. The interpretation of results indicates that a significant number of the teaching staff participating in this study has encountered barriers such as: the insufficient level of digital competences (34%), lack of adequate instruments for the online teaching-learning-evaluation of children with different types of deficiencies (32 %), as well as technical difficulties (12%). However, despite the difficulties encountered due to the suspension of face-to-face meetings between the teachers and the students, (42%) of the teaching staff consider that the achievement of education in the virtual environment has contributed to the increase of the didactic act quality, bringing a series of benefits such as innovation, the personalization of the learning, bullying reduction, accessibility. The findings of this research offer important aspects targeting education in relation to many dimensions: the situation of the technical infrastructure on which the online learning is built; the level of digital competence of the teaching staff; the wellness of the teaching staff in this period.

Authors note:

The authors have equal contributions to this article.

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