STUDENT DEBUT

Educating children with mild intellectual disability in the online environment

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Abstract

The article contains a summary of the main problems encountered during distance education. The main challenges faced by teachers in special education, but also by their families are presented. The shift of special education to the online environment due to the covid-19 pandemic has led to the use of different methods and resources. One of the ways in which the adaptation to new methods and resources has been made is presented at the end of the article through a comparative analysis. It presents the traditional way of conducting a therapy session with children with mild mental disabilities and how it was conducted online.

Keywords: Special education, online education, covid-19, mental disabilities, resources.

Introduction

Education has been the concern of many specialists over time. One of the fundamental concepts they analyzed was learning - what it is, how we learn, what are the best methods to get a person to learn. In relation to the term learning, the concept of "barriers to learning" has been delimited. This concept refers to all the factors that prevent the individual from learning. A classification divides these barriers into three categories: participation barriers, curriculum barriers, and institutional barriers. The concern of specialists was to find ways to provide an inclusive education, an education in which to overcome learning barriers and each individual to have access to education and the opportunity to learn according to his needs (Gherguț, 2016 , pp. 84-86).

In early March, 2020 was declared a state of emergency due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This involved measures to prevent the spread of the virus, which has also affected the education and lives of all citizens. The closure of schools has been imposed as a method of safety and prevention of the spread of the virus. "The COVID-19 pandemic has led to the closure of schools in 20 countries and the closure of preschools in 19 countries in Europe and Central Asia. This has affected a total of 49.8 million children, from preschoolers to high school students ”(Antonowicz, 2020, p. 4).

The COVID-19 virus pandemic has accentuated the specific educational needs of people with disabilities and created new barriers to learning. The closure of schools has caused the loss of therapeutic support for many students as they did not have the appropriate technology and internet access to participate in the services provided through the technology (Garcia, 2021, p. 40).

The pandemic has also accentuated the barriers faced by children with special educational needs so far, and the main challenge has been to provide equitable access to education for all

categories of students. In the coming years, the education system should maintain this challenge no matter how the pandemic context evolves. Principals and teachers should be concerned and develop strategies to improve the education system by providing inclusive education to marginalized students (Antonowicz, 2020, p. 4). The pandemic context brought back the issue of inclusion, feeling the need to share experience in this field.

The article contains a comparative analysis of the methods of working with students with mental disabilities in education carried out physically, face to face and the methods used in the education of students with mental disabilities carried out at a distance. The difficulties encountered during the conduct of therapy classes are also analyzed and then the results and benefits of conducting distance education and using the specified methods are presented.

Online learning or distance learning?

The subject of online education has been disputed before, but with the pandemic it became the only way to achieve education. Although there is no clear definition and a common accepted term, using the term distance learning, virtual education is the new reality for most schools in various states (Sener, 2011, p. 392). However, a distinction must be made between online learning and distance learning. While the first involves planning and is based on inclusive pedagogy, the second is an online transposition of activities that were planned for classroom teaching (Manfuso, 2020).

The measure of school closure not only determined a transition of educational activities in the virtual environment, but also determined the rethinking of strategies. In order to be able to carry out online activities in accordance with the educational needs of the students, various strategies had to be included. In Ontario, Canada, parents and guardians of students were contacted by telephone to discuss their specific needs and how best to meet their needs. The challenges they encountered in educating children with special needs in the online environment were not the same, lasting for a longer period of time, but changing day by day depending on the tried and tested strategies that revealed new challenges (Sider, 2020, pp. 78-79).

Due to the closure of schools, all actors involved in education encountered challenges they had never faced before. One of the challenges was the lack of the necessary technological means, internet connection and digital skills. Students and their families could not participate in educational activities carried out in the virtual environment due to lack of access to technology. Either because they did not have a connection to an internet network, or because they did not have the appropriate computers or digital means. Students were prevented from actively participating in distance learning strictly because they did not have the necessary technological means (Nowici, 2020, p. 9).

Although some countries provided the necessary technological means and internet connection, some students still failed to participate in the online activities because they did not have a person to assist and support them. The inability of parents to get involved in their children's education due to the work schedule was another problem encountered. Students who did not have the necessary skills to manage their time were not present in class because they did not have a person to support them. Many of the students who did not have the skills of self-employment and autonomy were unable to participate in distance education due to the fact that their parents were busy with the service and had no other person to replace the role of teacher and guide them. in educational activities (Nelson, Murakami, 2020, pp. 109-110).

However, solutions have been found for these challenges faced by both students and their families, as well as teachers and education specialists. An example of good practice is that of schools in a Texas city. In the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, these schools offer a model for overcoming barriers to learning and give concrete examples of how inclusive education can be achieved. The main way is to strengthen the relationships with the students' family and to establish a partnership between the school and them. Without this partnership, the school cannot often have contact with the student, nor can it find out what the student's educational requirements are. Also, by establishing a partnership and a good communication relationship between teachers and parents, new strategies can be found as the parent's involvement in education can involve printing materials and motivating the student to participate in the activities carried out by the teacher. Another way is to enter into partnerships between the school and local institutions so that they support education. Institutions can contribute either by facilitating the internet connection or by other services they can provide at no additional cost. For example, the city store can distribute educational materials to students. Last but not least, quality professional training of teachers is a way to ensure inclusive education during the pandemic. Teachers need to be trained on the use of technological means in education and the main methods of teaching in the online environment (Tremmel, 2020, pp. 208-209).

Beyond the measures taken at national and institutional level, each teacher and student faced the need to adapt to new, effective means for distance learning. The means that were effective in the classroom were no longer available or useful for distance learning. For example, although the computer is part of the means needed for distance learning, students may not have the skills to use it. Some students will not be able to edit the text and will have difficulty due to lack of reading skills. However, teachers should encourage students to try new means, to develop skills they did not have before. Students should be encouraged to practice new ways of expressing themselves (UNICEF, 2020, p.17).

Video conferencing therapy

An example of good practice that encouraged a student to try new ways of expressing himself was through video conferencing. The therapy session is to be described for each activity, compared to how it would have taken place in the school office. Psychomotor therapy activity was conducted through video conferencing for a student with mild mental retardation, aged six years. With the closure of the schools, the therapeutic activities took place only through video conferencing, the student being in front of a tablet, positioned on the table, and the teacher being at a computer. It became necessary to change the working method. If until then, the therapeutic activity took place in the school office, and the student came into contact with concrete objects and materials, this became seemingly impossible in distance learning. The teacher was unable to facilitate the student's direct contact with objects in the environment.

One way in which the teacher adapted the learning and discrimination of colors was through a game in which the student had to bring in front of the video camera his favorite objects from the room. In turn, the teacher brought an object and presented it to the student, and the student presented his object. Thus, the teacher encouraged the student to position the objects in front of the video camera of the tablet, learning new ways of expression. Also, through a game, the teacher facilitated the color discrimination by asking the student to name the colors of his favorite objects, objects with which he came into contact in everyday life.

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Another way was by using a power-point presentation. The presentation was made so that after each color a reward is offered to the student through an image with a cheerful emoticon or balloons. The student looked at the tablet where the color slides appeared one by one and after each correct name, he was rewarded with the sound of applause introduced in the presentation slide and with the cheerful emoticon. In this way, the teacher moved from objects to abstract notions consolidating the first activity. The power-point presentation represented an adaptation to the virtual means of the cards used in the speech therapy office, in face-to-face learning.

The teacher also found a way to involve the student and develop his skills, replacing the worksheet he normally uses in the office. Collaborating with the family, he printed a series of objects that had to be colored and the whole family provided the student with the necessary colors. The teacher presented on the screen the object that the student had to color and asked him what color he would color it with. The student showed the teacher the chosen color and colored the image on the board. While the student is coloring, and the teacher is coloring the board displayed in the Paint application.

At the end of the therapy session, the teacher used an interactive game available on the wordwall platform in which the student had to sort a series of objects according to colors. Although initially it was difficult for the student to express his options, so that the teacher selected and moved the objects in the category chosen by the student, still later, the student understood how to verbally express his choice. In this way, the activity contributed to the development of the student's language by finding new ways to express himself. This activity replaced the sorting activity in the office in which the student received a series of images or objects and had to place them in the appropriate category.

During the course of therapies through videoconferencing, a number of difficulties were encountered, such as: lack of support from the family without which the child could not connect to the Internet, lack of means to print the files or the parent's inability to travel to pick up the files. In addition, of course, there were difficulties in relating to the child due to remote communication. In some situations, the child did not understand correctly the sound emitted by the teacher and the activity was difficult.

Conclusions and recommendations

Therefore, in the context of moving learning to a virtual environment, a series of problems were encountered regarding all the actors of the learning process. The sudden change produced by the impossibility of physical participation in educational activities required the finding of new technologies and means through which to continue learning. Although this period was difficult for both teachers and students and parents to overcome, adapting to the online environment has produced many positive effects. The introduction of information and communication technologies in learning has favored the integration of those with mobility difficulties due to health or family reasons, has led to the development of teachers' digital skills and has actively involved the student in the educational process. Also, through the use of technological means and distance learning, children with mental disabilities have developed new skills of autonomy and communication.

Given the experience described and the difficulties encountered, it is recommended to develop a close partnership between the school and the child's family. Starting with the people in charge of the school and up to the psycho-pedagogical teacher and the teachers who teach the specialized disciplines in the class (religion, physical education), there must be a constant

communication with the student's family. With the support of parents, there were positive results, as previously stated, but without their support, distance learning would not have been possible.

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