

The effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on special education

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic has affected children's education in all respects. After the closure of schools and the transition to online education, social differences and shortcomings in the education system highlighted several problems, including lack of teaching materials adapted for students with special educational needs, lack of digital infrastructure, lack of support teachers, inability to adapt to online school for children diagnosed with ADHD, epilepsy, autism. However, teachers, support teachers, parents and students sought and found solutions to meet the challenges, managing to lessen the impact of these completely new and unexpected situations.

Keywords: special education, inclusive education, students with SEN, inclusion, online environment, support teacher, socialization, online school.

Inclusive education refers to the quality of education that is offered to children, depending on their needs, starting from the idea that each child is unique, special, so he has special educational needs. It is a new concept that tries to democratize the school, offering equal opportunities for all children. "Inclusive education means the education of all people. It starts from two basic ideas: every child is a person who can learn and every child is a unique person. Inclusive education is a right that raises the issue of quality education and social common sense." (E, Vrășmaș, 2001, p 26).

Integrated education has emerged as a result of discrimination against children with special educational needs. It was found that these children are more likely to develop normally being integrated in mainstream education than in special education.

As T.Vrășmaș states, educational policies tend to transform schools and school policies in such a way that inclusive education can be achieved in everyone. The child with SEN is integrated in normal or special classes, benefits from a support teacher and an adapted curriculum. (T, Vrășmaș, 2001).

The integration of the child in mainstream schooling is an advantage, but it is possible depending on the degree of disability. The child benefits from the help of a support teacher and a team of specialists, but may have disagreements with classmates who do not understand why he is treated "differently", why he is not like them. In this case, the child will feel marginalized, rejected by society, and his self-esteem will decrease. They may also face the reluctance of teachers or the parents of other children.

The educational path of the child with SEN is especially important, but difficult to choose. All factors that could disrupt the child's rehabilitation and integration into society must be taken into account, each case being unique. The educational path must ensure the child with SEN a path to success, to school success, to social inclusion.

An inclusive school does not make differences between students, ensures equal opportunities for all and promotes diversity. In this school, children with SEN benefit from the support of a

multidisciplinary team consisting of teachers, support teacher / support, special education specialists and parents. These children need an adapted curriculum and personalized intervention plans. (Doru Vlad Popovici, 1999).

In Romania, inclusion is a concept, for the implementation of which specialists in the field have been making great efforts for at least 20 years. The foundations have been laid. From a legislative point of view, inclusion is achieved, it remains for us to educate society for acceptance of diversity. This is a long-term challenge. Children with SEN are still viewed with reluctance, and their integration into mainstream schooling is a real challenge. Even if CMBRAE / CJRAE decides the educational path of children to inclusive school, we actually encounter the refusal of teachers to work with them, parents who are bothered by the presence of a child with problems around their children, children who by their behavior labels and deepens the problems of "special" colleagues. The barriers are many and too few have been raised. We have the power to educate the new generations to accept diversity and to see inclusion as a normality, as it really should be.

In the current context, when the COVID-19 pandemic disrupts our lives and poses a greater challenge than the global financial crisis, the inclusion of people with special needs faces new challenges. Measures to limit the spread of the virus and a lack of clarity about when and how the crisis will end contribute to increased anxiety and uncertainty.

Globally, the main measures to prevent population illness are: social distancing, wearing protective masks, restricting travel, isolating infected people and quarantining their contacts, working online, closing theaters, cinemas, gyms, swimming pools, restaurants, parks, school closures, etc. Thus, although we understand the need for restrictions, we feel that our freedoms have been restricted, we live in fear that we can become infected anytime and anywhere, our specific human interrelationship is limited and practically our lives have moved to virtual space, on the Internet.

Of all these measures, school closures have particularly affected students from vulnerable backgrounds, children and young people from single-parent or low-income families, ethnic minorities and those with special educational needs. The educational process had to be adapted to the current conditions, and learning moved rapidly in the online environment. But the lack of digital infrastructure and reduced interaction with children are the biggest challenges in education. Regarding this form of learning, the Ministry of Education and Research and the National Authority for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Children and Adoptions have developed informative guides in the context of covid-19, through which they aim to inform, answer questions and solve as much as possible. everyone's problems, and the schools have developed good practice

guides that they have made available on the MEC website.

It would also have been necessary to create online platforms dedicated to children with SEN, in which there should be support materials, guidance, coordination as well as teaching materials adapted to special educational needs, given the large number of specialists in the relevant ministry who could create an educational platform belonging to the Ministry of Education and Research, even with European funds, as attractive as Easyclass and equidistant from the proposals (and impositions) of the technology giants from Silicon Valey, in which to facilitates the teaching process and its results. Creating our own e-learning platforms, on long-term would have given us financial security, data security and copyright. Instead, MEC chose the simpler

path and endorsed Zoom, Google Classroom, Moodle, Edmodo, Kahoot (MEC, 2020), Easyclass, etc.

„Save the Children” Organization conducted an opinion poll in 2020 to measure the impact of Covid 19 on education. The study reveals that while in Spain 5-9% of children and in Finland 18% of low-income children said they do not have access to a tablet or a computer (according to „Save the Children” International), in Romania, estimates are between 250,000 children (Ministry of Education and Research) and 1,800,000 children (according to „Save the Children” Romania analyzes), that means there is about half of the children in primary, secondary and high school / vocational education who have in their families only the phone mobile, which does not allow a real participation in the educational act and no adequate communication with the teacher and colleagues in the class webinars. („Save the Children” Organization, 2020)

The effects of online schooling vary depending on the ages and disabilities of the children.

For kindergarten and primary school children, socializing and all that the formal framework of the school entails are vital things. For them, play is the basic activity, their source of energy. Children are looking for the company of children as is natural, and kindergarten and school were the environment in which they met these needs. It is really a challenge for parents to find the time, energy or availability to play with their children, especially for those who work online from home and make an effort to manage their time and to stick to the schedule of the little ones. It's not easy for them, in every morning, to let 25 students enter in their house with their parents and teachers. In the same situation are teachers, who are constantly assisted by students' families and who feel persecuted, embarrassed, have attitudes that are perhaps too controlled, but successfully face these challenges, trying not to leave behind children with SEN integrated into mainstream education, or the typical ones but which are slower, less familiar with the technology or more restless. We can also add that, in turn, teachers are parents and their children also learn online and have the same needs as everyone else.

For those in high school, the challenges are fewer. Except for children with SEN, typical students do not need the permanent help of their parents, because the online environment is already a part of their lives. For them, the online or hybrid system can be applied as long as the teacher is creative and uses all kinds of resources, including examination.

In high school it's more complicated, because students have become too used to the online system. From their point of view, the school can be replaced at any time with these services that can no longer be called education and learning, and many of them do not even want to go back to school because they believe they have enough autonomy to be able to manage their study and learning. As long as they socialize in their home environments with friends, colleagues, not out of fear of the pandemic, but for convenience, they do not necessarily want to return to school. However, school is something else, it is not just a transmission of knowledge, school is a learning universe, a learning environment in which all things that are outside of class are particularly important. Being able to convince them that the real school is not behind a computer, in their pajamas and appearing in the webcam when they want it, has become a challenge. Discussions have already begun with student associations for the implementation of online schooling as a form of education. The real danger is, in fact, the increased risk of dropping out of school.

A very important aspect to emphasize is the socialization of children and adolescents, which is a two-way process: while helping children with disabilities in their socialization, it also teaches typical students in a more inclusive and empathetic way. Therefore, it is very important that,

whenever possible, even during isolation, students have contact with each other, which should not always be mediated by the teacher (except for support teachers or interpreters, when is necessary). This type of socialization can be achieved through video calls, or even telephone calls or social networks and can be a beneficial process both to meet the need for socialization of children with SEN and to develop the empathy of typical children thus preparing a future inclusive society. in the true sense of the word. Therefore, it is very important that during the breaks between classes, the video meeting is not closed for students, to feel almost the same as during school breaks.

For children with SEN, the situation is much worse. I am not against progress, on the contrary! In the teaching activity before the pandemic we used software and the Internet as means or tools, but I do not think it is a good idea from a pedagogical point of view to completely move the education school to the online environment, because the effects are devastating, at least for children with special educational needs. The human component and the child training component have been profoundly altered in this relationship mediated exclusively digitally.

The online environment is not a neutral one, on the contrary, it is an environment that alters the mental processes involved in learning, especially attention. On the computer screen, the struggle for the student's attention is much fiercer than in the real environment, thus explaining why an initially attentive student can be easily lost during an hour of class. Moreover, his mind perceives the computer / laptop / tablet as play objects, not learning objects.

In addition to all these problems mentioned above, we must not forget those of children diagnosed with ADHD, autism, epilepsy, or other learning disorders. They are not medically allowed to sit in front of the computer. They need eye contact and even under normal working conditions it is very difficult to establish that eye contact. Using the computer is almost impossible. Due to their inability to concentrate, they lose patience and leave the computer. Teachers do not have the necessary tools to recapture their attention and direct their learning.

Theoretically, the support teacher should go to the child's home to physically support him during the lesson, but here we run into other problems. Do parents allow the teacher's presence in their home? Does the child have a learning environment that allows activities to take place? The child's home can be unsanitary, unsafe. Knowing that he can contact the Sars-cov 2 virus or transmit it, is the support teacher willing to make this compromise? Does the legal framework allow it? Here we have a lot of questions to which we can give multiple and often unfavorable answers, because we know that there are more families with precarious financial situations than those who have opportunities to support the education of children. We discover here other inequities, which should not exist, because our duty is to respect the law and not to leave anyone behind. All these shortcomings result in inequality in the quality of education.

The only certainty at this time is that the families of children with SEN face a lot of problems, and experts say that without a doubt, regressions have already begun to occur in the absence of therapies, routine and socialization.

Many of them cannot adapt to the new learning systems. Children with disabilities need physical interaction with teachers and colleagues to learn to socialize and integrate into society. Online schooling is not the best option for them. Even for students who have access to adequate digital resources, the importance of the learning environment must be mentioned. How many children have their room? How many children are learning in a small space, which they share with other family members? For example, a family with three children who have classes in the same time slot, how do they do it? First of all, there must have three tablets. Then three rooms. If one of the

parents works from home, the situation becomes complicated. Parents must face these challenges. Even though MEC did not actually solve the problems of children with special educational needs other than by distributing tablets with internet connection, teachers and support teachers in Romania, together with other specialists in the field, managed to mobilize and adapt to these challenges.

First of all, they turned to the help of parents to teach them how to help their children in online school activities, turning parents into "educational tools". In order to achieve these things, it was necessary for the teachers to adapt their syllabus to that of the parents, moving the afternoon classes according to their needs. Moreover, teachers preferred to organize the class into smaller groups or work individually, because they found that in this way information circulates faster. The teaching-learning-assessment process has been adapted according to the disability, to each person's development potential. The result of these measures is the exhaustion of teachers due to overtime. In the Romanian statistics there are 70,000 children with disabilities (ANDPDCA, 2020) of which 2000 are hearing impaired. For them, wearing a mask causes a major problem: the impossibility of communicating with society. The facial expression completes the message sent by the hands. The very name of this language suggests this, gestural mimicry means facial expression and gesture. It is clear that these children can only learn face to face with the teacher without masks. Teaching online, although it seems a challenge for teachers, is not really difficult. The hearing impaired are used to communicating by video call. Problems arise when we refer to other therapies. Teaching speech, for example, requires physical touches in the neck area to feel and to imitate the vibrations of the vocal cords, and this process must begin at an early age and continue without interruptions.

In the educational activities carried out with hearing-impaired children, we used teaching materials and watched stories filmed in LMG, on the Orange Foundation website. They, in partnership with ANIALMG, developed the Projects "Manual in Romanian Sign Language", World through Color and Sound, Application in Sign Language, Dlmrg.ro - the first online mime-gestural dictionary in Romania and the Collection of stories and literary works translated into LMG. (Orange Foundation, 2020).

Another category of children whose education is hampered by school closures is the visually impaired. They are dependent on specialists for the study of shapes and proportions. This education is done by guiding the hand of the blind child over a map, a drawing, describing at the same time the representation. In this way, the blind child mentally creates the representation of intangible forms, concepts and proportions. Parents do not have the necessary knowledge to replace specialists.

Visually impaired students need tactile materials in order to learn. To help them, the Association for Urban Development has developed a mobile application through which the blind can study tactile boards and a virtual library where they can download free tactile materials.

As parents and teachers of students with disabilities we find that: online education cannot be achieved on all types of disabilities / difficulties / CES because there are too few specialists and support teachers in relation to the real needs of inclusion, teaching materials are insufficient or unsuitable students, the absence of socialization generated unwanted behavioral effects, such as the reappearance of stereotypes, teacher-student and student-student communication is flawed, lack of digital infrastructure, poor social status of many families, inadequate learning environment for online schooling; parental involvement in school activities is essential, the risk of dropping out of school increases.

"The man was born free and is everywhere in chains." Jean Jacques Rousseau

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