

OPPORTUNITIES FOR INCLUSIVE EDUCATION DURING THE PANDEMIC

AUTHOR'S DATA

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ABSTRACT

Equalizing opportunities for everyone to make progress in learning continues to be a challenge worldwide. Pandemic conditions exacerbated attention to the difficulties in organizing an inclusive space, actualized with the forced transition to distance and online learning.

The article shows the main difficulties and possibilities of introducing distance education technologies in the education system of students with disabilities in terms of creating conditions for improving the quality of education and further socialization.

The article is based on theoretical review and analyses of the situation based on the standards and regulations existing at the moment since the pandemic has spread worldwide.

Keywords: students with disabilities, inclusive education, pandemic, COVID 19, online education, distance learning.

INTRODUCTION

Ensuring better health conditions, rehabilitation, and education for persons with disabilities and persons with special educational needs are the most important main and inalienable conditions for their successful socialization, full participation in society, effective self-realization in various types of professional and social activities. However, providing everyone with an equal opportunity to make progress in learning continues to be a challenge around the world.

The UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education (1960) and other international human rights treaties prohibit any attempt to deny or restrict access to education based on socially imputed or perceived differences such as gender, ethnicity/social origin, language, religion, nationality, economic condition, and abilities.

In this regard, UNESCO promotes inclusive education systems that remove barriers that limit the participation and success of all students, take into account different needs, abilities, and characteristics, and eliminate all forms of discrimination in the learning environment. In 1994, the Salamanca Declaration on Principles, Policies, and Practice in the Education of Persons with Special Needs was adopted, which gave rise to the slogan "Education for All". From now on, inclusion is not limited to persons with disabilities, it includes the education of persons with cultural, linguistic, and other characteristics.

The situation associated with the spread of a new coronavirus infection COVID-19 has become a source of many problems, which, as practical experience and the results of online research show, many countries were not ready to solve. Among these problems, the problem of the transition of a significant part of educational organizations to distance learning forms stands out.

ANALYSES OF THE SITUATION

In August 2020, UN Secretary-General António Guterres launched the concept note "Education in the era of the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond", warning that "the pandemic has caused the most severe disruption to the world's education systems in history and threatens to destroy skills and knowledge that can cover more than one generation of students. The paper calls on national authorities and the international community to work together to bring education to the forefront of recovery programs and to invest in education.

Higher education is likely to see the highest dropout rate and a projected 3.5% decline in enrollment, resulting in a 7.9 million decline in enrollment, according to UNESCO. In second place is preschool education: according to forecasts, the number of children attending school will decrease by 2.8%, i.e., for 5 million. According to these projections, 0.27% of primary school students and 1.48% of secondary school students, corresponding to 5.2 million girls and 5.7 million boys, are at risk of dropping out of school. Referring to UNESCO General Director Audrey Azoulay: "These findings highlight the urgent need to ensure continuity of learning for all in the face of this unprecedented crisis, especially for the most vulnerable".

The concept note made recommendations in four areas to mitigate the effects of the pandemic, one of which is "Strengthen education systems for equitable and sustainable

development. Restoring resilience requires prioritizing equity and inclusion through measures that address the needs of the most marginalized and vulnerable students and ensure that economic hardship and gender norms do not prevent girls from returning to school. Risk management capacity needs to be strengthened at all levels...” (Amelan, 2020).

The situation with the coronavirus pandemic has made life-changing adjustments to the global education system. The crisis caused by a dangerous new coronavirus required urgent measures to reduce the risks of the spread of infection in various areas of people's lives and activities. In the field of education, an urgent transfer of the educational process to a distance from using e-learning technologies was chosen as such a measure. Among the difficulties of introducing distance learning the following important factors were mentioned:

- **psychological** (as a result, a decrease in the effectiveness of training due to an unusual format of classes and a drop in motivation),
- **socio-psychological** (family-friendly responsibility for organizing distance learning for students),
- **methodological** (difficulty in transferring some activities to online environment, the need for additional training for teachers in new teaching methods),
- **political** (insufficiency of management models that describe the transition to online learning).

In connection with the vital need to create special educational conditions for persons with disabilities, the need to study the possibilities and features of using distance technologies in an inclusive educational space has been identified. The pandemic has also provided a chance to rethink the need for accessible education for students with special needs. At the same time, it is known for sure that the violation of accessibility functions in electronic materials, online courses, and online learning platforms can lead to the exclusion of a person with disabilities from the educational process and socialization. These data are presented in the reports of various international organizations (GPE, 2020; UNICEF, 2020). As a basic message, these reports indicate that people experiencing social disadvantage and marginalization are known to be disproportionately impacted by ill-health and within the frame of the COVID-19 pandemic, persons with disabilities may have an increased risk for exposure, complications, and death (GPE, 2020; UNICEF, 2020).

Thus, in the works of researchers from different countries, the question is raised of improving the system of organizing distance learning for students with disabilities and special educational needs during the period of self-isolation caused by the spread of the new coronavirus infection COVID-19.

A group of researchers conducted a rapid published literature review by searching six online databases to summarize original research findings on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on people with physical disabilities (Eskytè, Lawson, Orchard, Andrews, 2020). The reconfiguration of public space needed to ensure that physical distancing is possible provides an opportunity to improve accessibility and inclusion in city streets. The impact of the pandemic was also analyzed from a different perspective while reflecting the experience of building and developing an inclusive environment in England and Australia (Kavanagh et., al, 2020). The results indicate that while some countries, as well as Australia, have enhanced access to high-quality health care for people with disability others, like England, have failed to support their citizens with disability within the context of the pandemic.

Pandemic influence on school and college life has been also analyzed within the scope of the readiness of New York colleges for distance inclusive education (Meleo-Erwin, Kollia, Fera, Jahren, Basch analyzed, 2020). Analyzing the availability of distance learning and counseling resources on the websites of colleges and universities for people with disabilities, the authors state the fact that only 17% of colleges (universities) did not have links to services for people with disabilities on their websites. Of the remaining 127 institutions, only a few provided the above resources on the page for students with disabilities. At the same time, the most common resource was the provision of remote psychological assistance to students. The relationship between the size of the educational organization and the above resources was not statistically significant (Meleo-Erwin, Kollia, Fera, Jahren, Basch analyzed, 2020). Authors in the article highlight the opportunities the crisis presents for embedding accessibility and inclusion of persons with disabilities more firmly into the fabric of streets and call for renewed resistance to policies and practices shaped by ableist norms and attitudes (Meleo-Erwin, Kollia, Fera, Jahren, Basch analyzed, 2020).

As a result of these studies, the authors identified the following aspects:

1. The situation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has become a source of problems related to the organization of distance inclusive education for students with disabilities and special educational needs.
2. The dissatisfaction of the majority of students with disabilities and special educational needs with the quality and accessibility of online learning is associated with the lack of a system for their support, individual forms of education, and interaction with teachers.

3. The special educational needs of students with disabilities require the development of special technical means of communication that facilitate the perception of educational material by people of different ontological groups.
4. Improving the effectiveness of distance inclusive education requires the development of a system of individual support for students with disabilities and special educational needs, as well as ways to enhance their educational activities.

These provisions are the main conditions that must be taken into account when organizing an inclusive educational environment in the context of distance learning.

CONCLUSION

The implementation of educational programs using e-learning and distance learning technologies is the most significant form of organizing the educational process for people with disabilities and disabilities, especially for students with limited mobility and students with complex developmental disorders. The use of distance learning technologies makes it possible to make adjustments to the organization of the educational process for persons with special educational needs at the stage of recovery from diseases, during rehabilitation activities when students are unable to attend classes. The individual training schedule allows them to stay in a "familiar" home environment, making it possible to combine study and rehabilitation treatment.

An important and responsible stage in building the educational process, taking into account the use of distance learning technologies, is the choice of platforms and messengers and the implementation of primary monitoring of the capabilities of students with disabilities and (or) special educational needs, the identification of communication channels, familiarization with the possibilities of asynchronous (off-line) and synchronous (online) modes. However, it is necessary to consider the following important points:

- systematization of verbal material, its schematization, translation into tables, diagrams, supporting texts, glossary;
- accompanying the material being studied with clarity;
- division of the studied material into small logical blocks;
- increasing the share of specific material and observing the principle "from simple to complex" when explaining the material;

- introduction of the practice of anticipatory reading: preliminary selection of unfamiliar and incomprehensible words and fragments, their explanation, entry into the dictionary;
- adaptation of the text (refusal of long phrases and complex sentences);
- compliance with the requirements for educational texts (breaking the text into parts; highlighting the supporting semantic points; using visual aids);
- dosing the use of verbal and visual components in lectures / practical tasks, etc.

The use of special textbooks, teaching aids, and didactic materials is possible due to the availability of access to electronic forms of textbooks, electronic applications for textbooks on publishers' websites, as well as a large number of educational Internet platforms and various services, including the ZOOM video conferencing service, Learning-Apps.org - a service for creating multimedia interactive exercises, Google services - Google Drive cloud storage, the service for exchanging tasks between a teacher and students Google Class, services for creating route and worksheets, surveys, tests - Google Forms, Presentations, Documents, etc.

Counseling, training of parents and (or) persons replacing them become special tools for using special methods of training and education in the distance educational process. This is necessary because It is the home environment that acts in these pandemic conditions as a “shell” of the educational space.

So, persons with disabilities and (or) special educational needs should have the same opportunities as everyone else in obtaining an education. In modern conditions, the possibility of using distance learning methods in inclusive education has been updated. The main problems in the transition to the online format were named: limited access to the technical infrastructure, insufficiently developed competencies in the field of online pedagogy, and the requirements of specific areas of knowledge that are incompatible with the distance learning model. At the same time, COVID-19 has increased virtual mobility as an alternative to the physical mobility of persons with disabilities and (or) special educational needs.

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