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Online Learning of Students with Special Needs: Teachers' Perspectives

Abstract

The COVID-19 quarantine has affected educational systems in Georgia and all over the world, forcing to transform curriculum into an online format, which is a challenge for all the educational process participants. While online learning quickly became the default solution globally because of school closures, it was not the most accessible choice for the students with special needs. The aim of the research is to study the implementation of online learning of students with special needs amid the COVID-19 pandemic and investigates the challenges experienced by teachers during this period. Within the qualitative research in-depth interviews with selected practicing teachers were conducted. The vast majority of respondents are in favor of classroom lessons, as it helps the child to develop social skills, and due to the diversity of resources - motor skills, face-to-face communication, collaborative learning, physical contacts are extremely important for pupils with special educational needs. Some students do not have access to technological equipment and the Internet and were unable to use online learning platforms. Distance learning has increased the involvement of parents in the teaching process. Students with disabilities need confidence in the accessibility of the online learning tools that are becoming increasingly prevalent in education not only because of COVID-19 but also more generally. Educational technologies will be more accessible if they consider the learning context, and are designed to provide a supportive environment.

Keywords: Online Teaching, Inclusive Education, Students with Special Educational Needs, Teachers' Points of View.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected educational systems all over the world, forcing to transform curriculum into an online format. The unexpected change has been particularly challenging for students with special educational needs and their families (American Institutes for Research, 2020). Studies confirm that pandemic considerably reduced support services provided for students with special needs by special

education teachers (Lassoued et al., 2020). According to studies students with special needs are under a risk since distance education is the extraordinary that can meet their educational needs (Petretto et al., 2021; Escobar et al., 2021).

Studies show that students with special needs were unable to adapt to distance learning (Al Lily et al., 2020). They may have difficulty engaging effectively in distance learning (Patel, 2020; Boulton, 2008). Often they could not

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engage in online lessons on a regular basis while their teachers had no feedback on their lecture activities (Fei and Luanjiao, 2020; Sigirtmac, 2020). Some students may be highly reliant to established study relationships and may experience severe anxiety as a result of its disruption (Buchnat & Wojciechowska 2020). Other students with complex physical needs, may depend on access to equipment and professional support that is only available in school (Asbury et al., 2020; Tomaino ET AL., 2021). Students with special needs did not receive supportive educational services (Toseeb et al., 2020; Aishworiya & Kang, 2020). Under online learning conditions, special education teachers may not be able to provide all kinds of services to students (Toquero, 2020; Kim & Fienup, 2021). It can be difficult and sometimes even impossible to work for certain purposes that require direct contact. Communication and collaboration between teachers, parents and students was very limited (Agoratus, 2020; Bakkaloglu & Ergin, 2020).

The aim of the research is to study the implementation of online learning of students with special needs amid the COVID-19 pandemic and investigates the challenges experienced by teachers during this period.

Materials and Methods

Within the framework of qualitative research, the in-depth interviews were conducted. A nonprobability targeted sampling method was used to identify and recruit the main participants of the study. *The general staff consisted of currently working special education teachers from all regional units of Georgia. The sample size was determined by 25 respondents.*

The survey tool was a semi-structured questionnaire. The interviews were digitally recorded using voice recorders and later transcribed for the data analyses purposes. Data entry, editing, and analysis were done using NVivo software. To analyze the interviews, a case-centered narrative approach was used. The interviews were transcribed and checked carefully. The next step was to describe interviews thematically, this was, a structural element of narratives identified to get the main points of the stories. The respondents' names and any aspects that might reveal their circumstances were omitted to preserve their confidentiality.

Prior to the interviews, each participant was informed about the purpose of the study and written informed consent was obtained. We informed participants that they had the right to refuse participation and could retract their responses at any time during and after participation. Research was carried out in accordance to ethical principles of scientific

research, the Declaration of Helsinki and has been approved by the Research Ethics Board of Caucasus University.

Results and Discussions

In the online teaching process, 25 special education teachers were interviewed as part of qualitative research to understand the special education profession, work style, and the problems created. All respondents are female. They represent different age categories (from 24 to 64 years old). Teachers are from different regions of Georgia. It was found that 16 schools are located in cities, 8 in villages and one in a small town. Except for one school, every one of them is public. It turned out that all teachers have a different number of students with special education needs, some with only one, some with two or three. Some have 11 or 26 pupils. Teachers also talked about children's diagnoses, the most common being intellectual developmental delays and the autistic spectrum. We also encounter diagnoses such as Down syndrome, hearing and speech problems, behavioral disorders, cerebral palsy, hydrocephalus and vision problems.

Of the 25 respondents surveyed, all have higher education. As it turned out, the interest in the profession of special education teacher was due to several reasons. Most of them said that they could not be employed in their profession, so they decided to try teaching:

"It turned out to be a very interesting field for me and I decided to try this field because I could not be employed in my profession". (Samegrelo-Zemo-Svaneti, working in a city school)

The process of online teaching is unimaginable without electronic means; therefore, it is interesting to see if teachers have encountered difficulties in this regard. For most, the tools needed to conduct the lesson are available. Some do not have access to them, although the number of such is small (4 respondents). The situation is most difficult when the equipment is available for teachers and not for pupils. One of the teachers said:

"... we have a lot of problems in this regard because mainly these children are in a difficult social situation, families have a very difficult social background and do not have access to the Internet or a computer." (Shida Kartli, Working in a rural school).

According to respondents, pupils with disabilities need the active help of parents, although as it turned out, some of them are not properly versed in modern technologies. Finally, it can be said that only 11 of the respondents use technical equipment with great frequency and therefore conduct lessons without any particular problems.

The majority, nine respondents, use both Zoom and Messenger. Teachers try to consume a program that will be more accessible to children and their parents. However, the biggest problem is that the families have no opportunity to participate in the lesson process. Some of the respondents mentioned that they can communicate with pupils only by phone and there are cases when this is not possible, so teachers contact families and try to provide them with the necessary resources by distance.

As for the problems with the use of technical devices, the biggest obstacle is the lack of internet, it often shuts down or delays and significantly hinders the lesson process:

"The internet is a problem for me, I think my phone is not answered, I call them so often because it is too busy." (Imereti, working in a rural school).

The problem is the malfunction of technical devices. According to teachers, their computers are out of order and often shut down or crash. Some teachers have problems with the team, for example, they are not able to register a student, often do not hear the voice and unable to conduct some lessons due to lack of electricity. Such cases are especially common in villages. Finally, only 5 respondents turned out to be those who did not pose a particular problem with online learning.

According to nine respondents, online learning has some difficulties as they have family members who also need a computer and personal space. Some of them have several children who have schooling and need parental help. It is very difficult to isolate the room during the winter, because they do not have heating everywhere.

Respondents also spoke about school support. Most of them, 17 respondents, said that they are supported by the schools as much as possible and they try to provide them with the necessary resources. Several respondents mentioned that they use a school computer. Four respondents said they did not apply to the school and preferred that if a problem arose or they needed to buy something they could resolve the issue themselves. Only three participants said they did not feel much support from the school and did not notice their particular involvement and diligence. Most of the schools provided teachers with all the necessary instructions related to the use of online programs. Some also received information through trainings, while some independently found the necessary information with the help of social networks and various groups.

Most of the respondents mentioned that their method of distance learning has changed, which is reflected in the increased collaborative learning between teacher and parent.

"Cooperative learning is the most important thing between a teacher and a parent, and that is what online learning has brought us, that we are constantly cooperating with parents."

Some pupils are more developed because they are introverts and it is much more convenient for them to present themselves on the computer, online teaching is not available to some pupils at all due to lack of equipment or internet, which is the reason why teachers prepare assignments for pupils and provide them with files to teach, online teaching does not allow observation, because the teachers do not know in such conditions, the pupil completed the task independently if anyone helped. Also, special education teachers have very little time for lessons, computer learning has changed the activities and assignments that teachers give to pupils, in such conditions family members are very helpful to pupils, thus sometimes bearing their services, teachers are more dependent on their parents during online learning, which makes the teacher's assessment of the pupil even more subjective. A significant proportion of respondents point out that teachers are more mobilized in online teaching, this form of teaching requires more effort from them and it is stressful for them.

"We need more effort, more endurance. Now it is the first class, especially since the pupils have not yet been able to understand where they were, what was happening at all, what they have to do, then they went online very quickly, so there is more effort to attract their attention, interest and engage in activities after that." (Kvemo Kartli, working in a city school)

Some pupils are not involved in online learning because they do not have internet and equipment, and in some cases parents are opposed because their children have special learning difficulties and therefore simply do not want for their children to be involved in online learning, believing that such teaching is pointless for them. Respondents also mention that some pupils are actively trying and are involved in online learning. Teachers also talked about the fact that online learning is especially difficult for first graders, pupils have become more dependent on parents because they cannot use the equipment independently, a small part of the respondent also notes that attendance in district/rural schools is higher than in cities.

"In relation to urban schools, we have more attendance in district and rural schools, students often do not miss, often not, if something was not like that, the child will not miss, there is not." (Mtskheta-Mtianeti, working in rural schools).

The involvement of parents in online learning has increased, they already have the functions of assisting their children, however, some parents are not involved in online learning for several reasons: They oppose online learning

because they believe this form of teaching is useless for their children.

"They say that he still does not understand anything, it does not make sense to him. And I say, he cannot understand, he cannot understand, he will see the teachers, he will see the children, he will greet them, he will learn some skills and we have not reached that far." (Kvemo Kartli, working in a city school).

Some of them do not have computer skills, do not know the technology, some are just busy and do not have time, find it difficult to show willpower.

"She could have brought the child to school, she was waiting, but now that she is faced with the challenge that I will send her an assignment and she has to do it and help the child, there is a problem because there is no will, they cannot do it, the child does not cost and there are a thousand reasons. Some are on, some are not. And to tell you the truth, some people are interested, some people are not interested at all." (Shida Kartli, working in the city school).

A significant proportion of respondents noted that parental involvement did not change at all. An even smaller proportion of respondents mentioned that they tell parents about their children's attendance, but their senior children do not need maximum parental involvement during the online learning period.

A significant proportion of teachers point out that online teaching is of a lower quality than classroom teaching. Teachers can use a variety of resources and have close contact with students during classroom lessons. Teachers also say that time is not enough for online teaching, only 30 minutes are allotted for the teaching process, during this period normal communication is not possible, no effective result can be achieved.

"When one student is in the lesson, there may be some result, but when the teacher conducts the lesson in the "Teams", you cannot get the result you get in the classroom because only 30 minutes are allotted for the lesson. Sometimes the voice is not heard at all and therefore it is hard to talk about the result." (Samegrelo-Zemo Svaneti, working in a city school)

For a significant part of the respondents, classroom lessons are preferred, in terms of the diversity of resources, as well as the possibility of physical contact. For example, a resource room has so many resources that a teacher can develop a student's motor skills, thinking and memory skills that are less accessible during distance learning. At the same time, part notes that online learning also has positive features, including the fact that communication with parents during distance learning has increased.

Respondents also shared the experience of other special education teachers. 11 of them

said that special teachers have mastered online teaching and are ready for this method of teaching. Nine of them mentioned that special educators are not perfect in providing online education because some of them are subject teachers, older, have fewer computer skills, which does not allow them to study perfectly, are novices with less experience, have difficulty communicating with computers or are inattentive to special education towards a student in need. Some of the respondents also mentioned that some teachers can't get involved in online teaching because some students do not have internet or equipment. A small proportion of teachers talked about teachers facing resistance from parents because they did not want to involve their children in online teaching. Some parents are illiterate and unable to help their children with online learning. One of the important issues that teachers (3) have raised is the issue of remuneration, they say that special teachers have very low salaries, which is the reason why they are leaving the positions, and the school is forced to hire inexperienced staff.

"Some people walk from the districts, some walk from the city to the district, they cannot pay for the road, their salaries are not enough, so they leave the schools and become subject teachers. An inexperienced staff enters the school again, not knowing where to start. When an inexperienced teacher enters the school, the quality is lost. I do not insult anyone, on the contrary, we should thank everyone who is in inclusive education, it is a very vulnerable field, but experience means a lot." (Shida Kartli, working in a city school).

A small proportion of respondents also noted that special education teachers who have children with disabilities themselves are distinguished by exceptional professionalism.

Most teachers agree that a face-to-face relationship between student and teacher is essential and is of paramount importance.

"Face-to-face relationships, touch, facial expressions are crucial, the most important for a child. If you look at a child with love, if you feel it in a school relationship, it is a celebration and motivation for the child, they learn better." (Racha-Lechkhumi-Kvemo Svaneti, working in the city school).

Through face-to-face communication, students develop social skills that can be achieved through emotional connection, eye contact, physical touch, empathy, and collaborative learning. A small proportion of teachers (4) also point out that the level of responsibility of students in face-to-face teaching is much higher, there is less chance of cheating, while online objective assessment and observation of students are associated with difficulties.

The majority of respondents believe that the process of socialization of students has been hampered by distance learning. Some students with special educational needs found it hard to get used to the classroom, sitting at a desk, packing books. Being at home made the process even more difficult. Some students also have an internet problem that prevents them from interacting with classmates. A smaller proportion of respondents (7) believe that the socialization process has not been hampered. For example, high school students already had defined relationships, the experience of going to school, getting to know teachers, classmates and not having difficulty socializing, as well as children in neighboring villages already seeing each other more.

"It was not delayed because I know they may not go to school now, but they see children of their age in common, and there is no situation in the village where everyone is locked in a house, they still make friends and communicate with children their age." (Shida Kartli, rural school worker).

A small proportion of special education teachers (2) have no information about student socialization at all.

We received information from respondents about students' opportunities to make new friends. In most cases students' opportunities to make new friends were limited.

"It was very limited. They are very comfortable at home, they are alone. They used to have to go out because they went to school, went to a special center, and had to play with children. The children opened up a lot and suddenly closed down again due to online education and are still in their comfort zone alone at home, do not even want to see children their age anymore." (Kvemo Kartli, working in the city school).

According to part of the respondents (4), the opportunities of the students were not limited during the online study, because they live in the villages, still see each other, and also have a lot of virtual friends.

"They can make new friends because the children have a lot of virtual friends. They may not meet each other physically at all, but they even have so many friends on their Facebook page." (Guria, working in a city school)

Most of the respondents believe that students maintain old social connections through the Internet. High school students have enough computer skills to help them maintain old relationships on social media. Part of the respondents (5) think that their students have physical relations with each other even during the coronavirus pandemic because they live close to each other in the villages. 9 Respondents also say that students cannot maintain old social connections at all, because

some do not have computer equipment, some are a little age and cannot easily communicate with friends because they do not have technological skills. It should also be noted that not all teachers have information on how well their students have maintained old social connections.

Teachers (12) think that distance learning will have a negative impact on student development because online learning conditions will make it harder to realize in society. When they return to school they will find it difficult to establish themselves. They may have preferred online training. Also, students with special educational needs sometimes have learning difficulties. In this case, the learning period will take more time while learning online. Part of the students are waiting for when they will start learning, pupils are very tired of learning online. Teachers also point out that students' assessments after returning will be less satisfactory.

"When we evaluated the students, we had bad results. As you know, there is nothing permanent with students with special educational needs, they can learn and forget, fail to move it into long-term memory, but this year had particularly worse results. Neither the special educator nor the psychologist was satisfied with the assessment results because the results were low in terms of teaching and even adaptive skills. I do not know what the reason is for this." (Mtskheta-Mtianeti, working in a city school).

There are respondents (5) who believe that distance learning has neither positive nor negative impact on student development and has both characteristics, for example, parents are more involved during this period.

According to teachers (16), technology harms the psychological state of students, which is reflected in the fact that in distance learning students are easily irritated, angry, tired, impatient, and willful, become more addicted to technology.

"Yes, it is not good, pupils have already become very dependent on computer equipment." (Kakheti, working in a rural school).

Part of the respondents (6) did not forget to perceive the issue of deteriorating physical condition. They believe that students will experience spine and vision problems due to sitting and spending time with the computers. They (4) also talk about the fact that distance learning can affect students' communication skills, it will be impaired in online learning. Some teachers (3) state that distance learning does not affect the physical and psychological condition of students, which is explained by the fact that online lessons do not last long.

Most of the respondents (16) regarding the access of students to the equipment stated that

in their practice, there was a case when the students did not have access to the equipment.

"It is available to me personally, but it is not available for my pupil. I'm involved in "Teams," I've been involved in Messenger so far, I'm in "Teams" now. I work online with four students. The fifth pupil does not join because he does not have a computer or a telephone." (Imereti, working in a city school).

Some respondents mentioned that they have to prepare materials and provide them to students to teach at least to those who do not have the equipment, although there have been cases where the teacher and student have not been able to communicate with each other for months due to lack of internet. Respondents (4) also mention that, fortunately, they have students who have access to technology and are involved in online learning.

According to special teachers (12), a large proportion of students are unable to use the equipment independently and they need someone's help to be able to engage in online learning.

"They can do nothing without a parent because they are too young." (Shida Kartli, working in a city school).

According to nine respondents, some students mastered the technique easily, they are a new generation and it was not difficult for them to explore the new platform.

"Seniors have mastered it very easily and know it even better than teachers." (Racha-Lechkhumi-Kvemo Svaneti, working in a city school).

Some students have mastered the technology with difficulty but still manage to engage in online lessons and individual lessons independently.

Respondents (10) explained that parents and caregivers do not face challenges in engaging in online learning. As a small number of respondents noted, parents believe that online learning makes no sense to their children, so they are not involved in the process. Some parents work and students are helped by caregivers. Some parents have no helpers and cannot even control their children. Pupils who stay with their grandparents are less involved in online learning because older people have fewer technological skills. In large families, the choice is made more about the education of a child with a typical development than about a person with special educational needs.

Discussion and Conclusion

The experience of special education teachers in this study has shown that online learning has many challenges and difficulties for them and their students. First of all, some teachers do not have access to the necessary

technical equipment. However, sometimes teachers' computers or mobile phones work with defects, which creates obstacles. They also talk about the shortcomings of online programs: sound is inaudible, it often shuts down, teachers are not able to register students, etc. besides, not to run into problems with the internet, some teachers have to buy online packages, which comes at an additional cost.

Based on the interviews, it is clear that the most essential and noteworthy issue is the socioeconomic conditions of the families. Students could not attend the lesson due to lack of internet and computer or mobile phone. Several other problems related to the online learning process have been identified. First of all, these are internet flaws as they often shut down and work with delays. There are also cases when the lesson is not possible due to power outages. It also should be noted that these problems are more common in villages. As it turned out, the situation at home is also a hindering factor for teachers. Most are married, have children, including schoolchildren. There are often cases, when a computer or a certain space is needed by several family members at the same time. Consequently, it is too difficult to distribute resources evenly. Respondents also mentioned that their children also need help in the learning process. Besides, during the winter they sometimes have to stay in a cold room because the whole house cannot be heated.

Respondents spoke about the involvement of the schools in online learning, and the majority noted that they pay maximum attention to the learning process and provide all relevant resources to teachers if necessary. Involvement of parents in the teaching process during the online learning period increased significantly. They help their children with homework and spend more time with them. Also, the relationship between parents and teachers has been improved and strengthened.

As for the involvement and opportunities of the students themselves, the teachers said that all this was much better done during the classroom. For children with special educational needs, direct communication is very important. Respondents also said that they have a resource room in the school, which is equipped with the necessary resources, special toys, and their use is essential for the development of pupils, but it is hard to carry out them in all online activities. For the children not to fall behind the program, they often send exercises, coloring books, etc. And in this way try to involve them in various activities.

Children find it difficult to maintain existing social connections and make it even harder to make new friends. Some are indeed able to communicate through social networks, but some students find it harder. Teachers have worked

hard to get closer to their classmates, and now they will have to start all over again. The villages are more or less able to have some contact with neighbors and classmates because they have yards and are more able to keep their distance.

Excessive use of gadgets negatively affects the physical and psychological condition and development of children. Many of them perceive mobile phones and computers as just for fun and find it difficult for them to learn lessons, get tired soon, and get more irritated. Being at home all the time, sitting in one place, lack of relationships with people will hinder their development and socialization.

Finally, teachers are slowly getting used to online lessons and trying to adapt to this situation. They still prefer classroom lessons and desire to return to schools as soon as possible to lead classes more effectively and promote student development.

Students with disabilities need confidence in the accessibility of the online learning tools that are becoming increasingly prevalent in education not only because of COVID-19 but also more generally. Educational technologies will be more accessible if they consider the learning context, and are designed to provide a supportive environment.

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